

When I went to theological College in 1966, I decided to find out how the other denominations in England worshipped God, because I had been working in South East Asia for 11 years. At my first Quaker Meeting, I was a rather mystified because we sat there for about half an hour just doing nothing. No one had warned me that there was no Minister; so I thought he must have got held up. But no, Quaker meetings are held in bare rooms and begin in silence, in “holy expectation of the Lord”, until a member of the congregation feels stirred by the Holy Spirit to speak. Sometimes they ‘quake’ with excitement, hence their name. It was somewhat amusing when the second person to speak that day said almost the opposite of the first one: so perhaps even the Holy Spirit gets mixed up sometimes! However, the Quakers have enriched English religious, social and business life far beyond measure with their insights. Another name for them is the ‘Society of Friends’, a much nicer title that aptly describes the nature of the whole Church. For in our Gospel reading, Jesus said: “I call you friends (John 15.15)”.

Friends are very precious indeed. It has been said that our relatives are thrust upon us but that we choose our friends. Yet friendships cannot be pre-programmed; they usually just happen. There is a mutual attraction and, as we say, ‘people click’. A natural affinity emerges and an ever-deepening accord develops as they grow together. But some people seem to have no friends and are intensely lonely; they don’t click with others. I once knew a woman like that. At her place of work no deep personal relationships ever blossomed. Nobody even asked about her personal life. In her tiny flat the only friendly voice that ever spoke to her was the radio announcer saying “Goodnight - thank you for listening”. How very, very, sad. To have friends is something for which we should be very grateful.

Of course, some people are excluded from our own choice of friends. For example: it is not easy to befriend a member of a Royal Family - though they can befriend us. But it can only be that way round, as a response to their invitation. So likewise with Jesus Christ: he chooses us to be his friends, it is his initiative. That gives us a tremendous sense of worth. We need never feel like a cog in a machine, nor conceited, because his choosing of us starts it all. The disciples were often tempted to feel proud of their privileged position: as were the Jews of the Old Testament, following God’s choice of Abraham to be his friend. Some church people act this way too. This is understandable but smugness has no place here. Jesus chooses and calls us to be his friends.

Jesus chose 12 special men to be with him. They enjoyed watching him heal the sick, feed the multitude, expound the parables, and share the secrets of the kingdom. He stood by them when they failed, and consoled them when they were dejected. In this chapter of our Gospel reading (John 15), he was talking with them about the mystery of his approaching death and initiating them into the fellowship of his sufferings as he made known to them the Father. After his resurrection it was first to his friends that he appeared. They meant so much to him. We sometimes hear in the news that there has been a road accident with fatal injuries to a person. Such news can be of little significance to us, until we learn that the one killed, was a friend of ours. Then we are shaken and

bereft, the thought of that tragic death haunts us. Letters of sympathy are written and the funeral is attended. That is the cost of friendship; the price of commitment.

The Church may be a 'society of friends', but it is most definitely not just a friendly, matey society of people who like to take tea and chat together from time to time. We do drink together, but from the same cup as did the disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus was about to lay down his life for his friends. Such love and devotion was an awesome act of commitment.

In his Letter to the Galatians (3.23-47), St Paul describes the relationship between slaves and freemen: but there is a much more vivid description in Alex Haley's book "Roots". There was a dramatic television series based on it. , Haley describes Negro slavery so vividly. One is struck by the complete absence of consultation in their lives. Slaves are given orders, but never reasons. They could be suddenly and most cruelly separated from their loved ones and sold without any warning or apology. It was totally inhuman. Jesus shows the contrast between the relationship of master and slave, and that between two friends. The friend is glad to inform and confide, to involve the other person in painful decisions. That is how Jesus treated the disciples. As he said in our Gospel reading: "I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father" (15.15).

Early in my ministry, a wise old priest friend said to me: "Raymond, a real friend is one who knows all your faults - but still loves you in spite of them!" I have learnt many times since how true that is, and with my many faults I certainly need friends! When things go wrong for one, especially when it is through no fault of one's own, it is extremely comforting to have the support and encouragement of friends. But it is even more comforting to have their friendship when the trouble you are in, is largely through your own fault! It is then that we need to remember Jesus' words from our Gospel: "This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you ... you are my friends".

After moving from Ramsay Hall, I went to several churches before I attended this church of Heene almost exactly two years ago. I was immediately struck by the friendly greeting I received and the way Roger celebrated the Eucharist so decided to make it my spiritual home – and you have had to put up with me ever since! And may this church here in Worthing always be known to be a 'society of friends'.