The Everlasting Friend

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

January 19th, 2020

The Gospel of John is a gospel about friendship, of earthly and heavenly friendships made possible through divine friendship. It models who Christ is and who the Church is, and it shows us a path to walk in discovering Christ and becoming Christians, that is, becoming the Church—people who have found a relationship with Jesus and are one with Him and each other in this divine friendship. Throughout the gospel, we see various instances of befriending, of relationships beginning. The pattern starts in the very first chapter, in our reading from the lectionary today: “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon” (John 1:35-39). It is a very ordinary narrative that highlights some key components in friendship-building. There is an introduction from someone: “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” There is curiosity: “The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.” And lastly, there is conversation and invitation: “When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’” This last portion of dialogue is especially important. In a very ordinary sense, it simply means that they asked Jesus where he lived; they were just making conversation. In a spiritual reading of this text, we could say that it means much, much more. They desired to know where he lived and how he lived, what his life is about. They could not have known then that Jesus would eventually invite them to abide in Him for all time, just as the Father abides in Him (John 14, 15).

What Jesus says is especially noteworthy. As the text reads, “He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter)” (John 1:39-32). In what is almost shorthand, John paints a picture of what we can expect from Jesus. First, we can expect an invitation: “Come and see!” Secondly, we can expect a desire to introduce Him to others. Andrew brings his brother Simon to meet the Lord. Lastly, Jesus pronounces: “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas.” In Christ, we find a new life, a new identity, a contagious new way of being.

The words “Come and see!” stand out. Jesus wants you to come with him, and he wants you to see something. What do you think you will see? Where will this story go? The Gospel of John is a story about friendship, but it may not be the kind of story about friendship you are accustomed to reading or seeing in films. First of all, friendship is not just words or feelings, and it is certainly not just about the words we want to hear or the feelings we want to nurse. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and hears things he never dreamed of hearing. There are even some demands—Nicodemus needs to be baptized! (John 3). While Jesus is inviting and does not judge, he nevertheless does not avoid the awkward truths, either, when speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). There are even arguments, as we read of in the Bread of Life discourse in John 6 or the discourse about knowing the truth that sets you free in John 8. Friendship is more than just words, more than just soft feelings. It is an ongoing conversation that involves truth, even if that truth is difficult or unwanted. Second, friendship is not just about good times. There are wonderful times—weddings with miraculous wine (John 2), a banquet for thousands in the open air (John 6)—but there are terrible times, like visiting Martha and Mary who have just lost their brother Lazarus (John 11) or having a last supper together, knowing that there is a traitor in the midst and that Jesus is heading to the cross (John 13-17). Third, though there are some political ramifications to what Jesus does and who He is, in his day to day life, Jesus does not approach people through politics: this is the case with the Samaritan woman and the royal official who serves the Herodian regime (John 4). In both cases, his interests are purely spiritual. He chastises the royal official for his lack of faith and then heals his son (John 4:48). Similarly, when speaking to the Samaritan woman, he corrects her misguided theology (John 4:22), while seeking her friendship. In both cases, Jesus treats them as real human beings in need of God. He does not give them political solutions. He gives them healing and living waters. Jesus is the same—seeking hearts that desire real truth, real salvation, and a real relationship with Him. It is a radically different path. It is a path of friendship, one not easy to understand sometimes, but one that promises more than we could ever imagine a friendship could offer. Fourth, the friendship that Jesus portrays is not just about receiving. Real friendship is often most inconvenient. And friendships that can handle inconvenience and tests tend to last better and longer, especially if both sides of the friendship are willing to be humble, giving, and forgiving. Nothing illustrates this better, perhaps, than Jesus getting down on his knees to wash his disciples’ feet (John 13). Yes, Jesus even washed his enemy’s feet, his own traitor’s feet. And even broke bread with him. Lastly, and perhaps what I love best about the Gospel of John, is that real friendship with Christ reveals who God is. This is seen when Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery (John 8), when he raises Lazarus (John 11); it is seen in the resurrection reunions with Mary Magdalene and Thomas (John 20), in the idyllic, peaceful morning of fishing, sharing breakfast on the beach and reconciling Peter at the very end of the gospel (John 21). In Jesus, there is always hope for relationships, for friendships, because His love is everlasting. I was reading an article online of some of the hilarious things school children write on exams. One exam question reads: “Describe yourself in three words.” The kid answered: “I am a rebel.” The one I loved most, which was sadly marked wrong, occurred on what I assume was a science exam. The question reads: “What is the strongest force on earth?” And below the question, the child had written: “Love”. Indeed, that is what Jesus teaches us over and over again throughout the gospels.

The friendship of Jesus is beatitude. I say that all the time—perhaps it becomes meaningless through repetition. Personally, I find it only increases in mystery with repetition. Maybe I am just slow and need to be reminded again and again. I don’t mind being reminded about the nature of Christ, though. It never gets monotonous to me. It nourishes me. I have to eat three times a day, every day, and as you can see for yourself, it has not bored me yet. Friendship with Christ is life in the Spirit (John 14-15, Romans 8, Galatians 5); it involves a cultivation of virtues or fruits of the Spirit. This might sound obsolete today. In our desire not to judge and to be compassionate, we seldom talk about virtues. They sound outmoded or irrelevant. I will answer that with an obsolete writer from the 12th Century, Aelred of Rievaulx, whose classic work *Spiritual Friendship* has much to say to us today. Aelred notes that friendships built on mere pleasure or even vice are unstable: “Those who share a vested interested in vice falsely claim the fair name of friendship, because one who fails to love is not a friend. One who does not love a comrade loves iniquity, for one who loves iniquity does not love but hates his own soul, and one who does not love his own soul will certainly be unable to love the soul of a comrade” (*Spiritual Friendship.* Tr. Lawrence C. Braceland, SJ. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010. 62). In the 90’s, I loved going to the Golden Princess and other theatres to watch gangster movies from Hong Kong. There is nothing quite like a good old-fashioned Hong Kong gangster movie. One especially popular series at the time was titled *Young and Dangerous* (古惑仔). Through various misadventures, these gangster kids that grew up in the same neighbourhood stick together through thick and thin. Quite fun to watch, but not terribly realistic. A more realistic view of friendship and vice would be something like *Goodfellas.* In the end, Henry Hill (played by Ray Liota and depicting the real-life Nicholas Pileggi) was paranoid, alone, cut off from society, unable to trust anybody, unable to enjoy life. He was in witness protection. And while crime stories are extreme examples, I have seen similar realities in much more innocuous situations. When there is no virtue to bind people together, they will turn on each other. I have seen people who were good friends for years tear each other to pieces later in life. Why? They did not protect their friendship with the cultivation of virtue; they did not even see it as a component. And thus, cracks developed over time that grew and eroded and eventually broke them apart. Sometimes people become friends through a shared hobby, sport, or art form. Sometimes people are excited about something for a time, and then they move on, and they not only move on from the area or activity of interest, they move on from the people associated with it. Commonalities are not enough to build friendship. They are a superb way of starting relationships, and some degree of commonality is essential, but it is not enough. I know some artists who met because of their shared interest in painting and drawing. What is interesting, however, is that I do not believe art is the only reason they are friends. Whenever one of them is ill or has a difficulty, I see the others going to great lengths to help that person out. Sometimes art even gets put on hold for a bit, and the real business of being friends takes place. I admire and respect them for that. And this has been going on for decades. There is virtue there, binding them together.

Real friendship is growth. It can change and mature like wine, but it only gets better if the right ingredients are there. Aelred of Rievaulx says, “In friendship, then, we join honesty with kindness, truth with joy, sweetness with good will, and affection with kind action. All this begins with Christ, is advanced through Christ, and is perfected in Christ. The ascent does not seem too steep or too unnatural, then, from Christ’s inspiring love with which we love a friend to Christ’s offering himself to us as the friend we may love, so that tenderness may yield to tenderness, sweetness to sweetness, and affection to affection. Hence a friend clinging to a friend in the spirit of Christ becomes one heart and one soul with him” (Aelred, 75); “You notice then the four steps that lead to the perfection of friendship. The first is choice, the second testing, the third acceptance, and the fourth the highest agreement in things divine and human with a certain charity and good will” (Aelred 90). What binds friends together can also bind communities together, and I have a suspicion that we speak about community-building at the expense of friendship-building. There are community centers all over the city; there are more social activities available today than when I was young. And yet, people are still lonely, alienated, polarized. Mosty, they’re just lonely. Very lonely. Loneliness cannot be cured through group events. Loneliness can only be cured through friendship. Only God can fill and cure loneliness. And I believe communities can only be cured through friendship—through divine friendship especially. Aristotle basically said that good citizens behave like good friends. That is what Christ called us to—divine friendship. There may be arguments, sacrifices, repenting, corrective changes in our theology; there may be chores, there may be mourning; but there will also be togetherness, love, mutual up-building, and a common, shared destiny of glory and eternal love. Jesus wants to be your everlasting friend. In short, that means there will be hope. What is the greatest force on the earth? The child I mentioned earlier was right. It is love.