

Bible Study II

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES - FORUM 9-13 JULY 2004

“IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS”

John 15: 12 – 17

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Jesus’ commandment to his followers was that they love one another as He had loved them: and He loved them, He said, by laying his life down for his friends.

Already in John 13:34-35 Jesus had told them that he had given them a new commandment: “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” He added there that it would be “by this” that everyone would know that they were his disciples, if they had love for one another.

This love as well is in the shadow of the cross because Jesus went on in this text to say that “no one has greater love than this; to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” To love one another as Jesus had loved them was to lay down their life for each other. Christian love is more than an emotion or an attitude. It is more than a virtue or a commitment. It is more than a way of living, it is a way of dying because it is a gift which arises from our living in the Risen Lord who died and then rose from the dead. We, on the other hand, have been raised from the dead into his risen life and now can die for love of God and our brothers and sisters, as he did.

In the opening lines of this discourse John tells us: “Having loved his own who were in this world, he loved them to the end” (13:1). It was for them that he crossed the Kidron valley, as John says, “before the festival of the Passover.” Now his disciples were being told that they too must love to the end, crossing their own Kidron valley, to their own Passover.

Jesus did not call his followers *douloi*, servants. They were much more than that. In this discourse, he gave them a word to describe their relationship with him. They were his *philo*i, his friends. They were to be like Lazarus, who was described as *hon phileis*, the one whom he loved, his dearly beloved friend. They too would be raised from the dead but only so that in living his new life, they might die again for others and for God.

He said that he had called them “friends” rather than “servants” because he had shared with them what he had heard from the Father. Moreover, he had specifically chosen them to receive that precious gift of communication, and so to become his friends. In choosing them he had “appointed” them to bear fruit, like the branches of which he is the vine, and to bear the kind of

fruit which would last. Because of who they were, the Father would give them whatever they asked in Jesus' name.

To be friends of Jesus is to be made his friends by him and by his choice. Nothing about his disciples deserved this choice or this love, and some were far from good choices for lasting friendship. Already when he washed their feet, an extraordinary sign of his extraordinary friendship, he had said "You are not all clean" because according to St John, he knew who was to betray him (13:11).

For his disciples and those who come after them, to obey his commandment to love one another would involve washing the feet of those who would betray them. As for Jesus, so for them and for us. Our loving depends upon a choice on our part not a worthiness on theirs.

Because this love of Jesus is so different, the world will believe that it is the Father who has sent Jesus if it sees this love in those who live in him and are one with him as he is one with the Father.

Christians may not always be the nicest people, the warmest people, the most hospitable people, the easiest people to relate to, or even the friendliest. They ought to strive for at least some of these qualities and would find it hard to proclaim the gospel if they had none of them.

But Christians, in Christ, are real friends who love to the end whomever God brings into their lives; and they can be this sometimes without all the various qualities which are part of friendship in a well-integrated, mature, virtuous, Christian. It would be a pity if we developed to a high degree the more obvious signs of love and became the nicest people in the world but stayed away from those who betray us or failed to wash the dirtiest feet or ultimately to die for others.

The other qualities can be counterfeited, learned and exercised for a time. The love Jesus speaks of is his life in us and it can only grow within us as his gift. It may take our whole life for that gift to grow very strongly in us. Along the way we may fail the test many times. However it is good to remember what it is we are meant to live and not to succumb to the most common temptation of his followers which is to settle for simply being really fine Christian people.

The friendship which Jesus extends to us, like the unity he shares with us, is always about the larger mission which he has received from the Father. We are to bear fruit like branches of the vine. Our friendship is with the one who was sent; and to share his friendship is to share in his being sent.

I am not sure that we don't sometimes settle for a friendship with Jesus for our own sake, if our hymns and our piety are in any way representative. Nothing can be more noble or beautiful than to be called and to be a friend of Jesus. But he has other friends and others who are not his friends. To be part of him is to be part of them and his mission to them. To look into the eyes of Jesus as one's friend is to discover the reflection in his eyes of all our neighbours and the most needy of them. He cannot see us, unique, intimate and personal as his relationship with us is, without seeing them as well. To discover our friendship with him is to discover that we have lots of other friends, his friends, whom we would often rather not have.

Jesus' friends are supported in their mission, their bearing fruit, by the Father who sent him. They can now ask the Father to assist them in the name of their Friend who is his Son. This is what can transform their weak efforts into a fruitfulness which will last.

We are some of the fruit of those who first heard him and were sent to bear fruit by proclaiming, founding, encouraging, sharing what they had received with those who would come after. What they had received was what he had received from the Father. This is what made them friends and enabled them to share with others so that they too could also receive not just what they had heard, but the friendship itself.

The opening verses of the first letter of John describe this in these terms: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life – this life was revealed and we have seen it and testified to it, and declared to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declared to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

What they received, they shared, so that those who heard the message from them, would be brought into the same fellowship they had with Jesus and with the Father who had sent him. In this text, Jesus described that fellowship in terms of friendship.

A very apt description for the Church and for each of our Christian communities would be “the friends of Jesus”. The love we are called to have is not so much the love we might have for our own particular friends, but the love for all of his friends. Indeed, through faith and baptism, he is living in his friends and to love them as his friends is in fact to love him whom we find in them.

The capacity of the Christian Church to stay together by God’s grace might appear to be fairly weak given the number of Christian communities which are even represented here in our gathering, but that there are so few and that they are here together is a miracle of God’s grace; and that our own particular Christian communities stay together at all is a miracle of God’s grace. Because Jesus is claiming the hearts of so many as his friends, they cannot really walk away easily from his other friends. As we struggle in our own communities to deal with the very divisive issues which everyone is confronting at the moment, it is good to remember that we are always talking to his friends about these matters. Our discourse, the boundaries of our relationship and our negotiations, are governed by this mutual friendship we have with Jesus Christ. When we forget this, our discourse or relationship easily becomes burdensome and even collapses into something which is the opposite of what it is meant to be.

This same friendship is the foundation of all ecumenical relationships. However we see the members of other Christian communities, we have to see each other as friends of Jesus. We ought to have an expectation of discovering him in the lives and witness of those who are “other” than ourselves, whenever we meet them. The openness that we need to have to “the other” in our Christian dialogues and collaboration is not simply our openness to them, it is an openness to him whom we will find in them. He is there among, and indeed living in his friends.

Some people believe that the ecumenical movement is grinding to a halt, that it is going backwards, or that we have entered a winter, or a darkness at this present point of history. I do not. The evidence is too great of many major developments even in the past ten years. The early days of the ecumenical movement were exciting ones because they involved the easier task of getting to know each other and of learning to do certain things together. These were ever only difficult to the extent that they were strange, or challenged our prejudices. For example, in those days we learnt to pray together, to collaborate in some works of welfare, and to meet in all kinds of ecumenical bodies.

Early dialogues were exciting because they involved once again getting to know each other and discovering that prejudice blinded us to all kinds of truths about our dialogue partners who were far less threatening or different to us than we might have believed.

That easy, exciting period is past. It was like a honeymoon in a marriage, or the first flush of a friendship, when one falls in love to some extent with one's new friend. Another stage follows when we realize that friendship, like marriage, is a long term relationship, and that friendships need to deepen by moving gradually to deeper levels of acceptance and understanding. At times, it also means that friends have to challenge each other when they do not believe the other is being their best possible selves, and to forgive each other when they fail, or offend.

We are in this phase in our relationships at this particular point in the ecumenical movement. The gift we need in abundance at this stage is patience. Perhaps sometimes we withdraw from each other, or misunderstand each other, or turn against each other, not because the obstacles to a deeper, warmer, more collaborative, more fruitful relationship are so great, but because we are so impatient and so unwilling to sit long enough with the other to discover Christ in them and with them. This is true both within our own specific Christian communities and in our relationships with other Christian communities.

No-one who has been reborn in Christ and taken by him into the intimate life of the Triune God, no-one who has been called "friend" by him, and has in turn recognized other Christians in that inner life of God, and has recognized other Christians as his friends as well, has any right *ever* simply to walk away from another Christian within their own community or another Christian community.

There may be times when we have to say we cannot walk with them at this point of our common journey because of what they are saying or doing, but we need to add that we will wait for them and for a future reunion. Our friendship is in some ways "on hold". Even when our partner seems to our eyes to be misunderstanding what Christ is asking of them, they are his friends and he wants more than we do that they be faithful to his friendship with them.

Our relationship may grow weak or troubled because of events that occur in one or other Christian community or within our own, or discoveries about each other which emerge, but this does not mean that our friendship with each other should end completely. We do not walk away definitively and utterly from another friend of Jesus.

We may have to pause and say we cannot walk with them in the same way at this point, but we can wait until the time comes when we can recommence our journey together. We are not deserting them. To do so would be to desert some of Christ's friends and we don't have the right to do that.

Obviously there are degrees of difficulty in a relationship, and there can even be the possibility of a rather definitive separation when some, to our eyes, have themselves rejected Christ. In doing so they reject us as well because we are his friends. But if we can recognize them still as his friends, then they continue to be, no matter how difficult the relationship, our friends as well. Discerning this correctly is very difficult and again, requires enormous patience. Historically, we have seldom had that patience in our dealings with each other.

Therefore, it is helpful sometimes to speak of estranged friends or alienated friends, who hopefully will one day be good friends again. I prefer to look at the 450 years of separation among the Christian communities since the Reformation as not a final break which we are now attempting to repair so that we can start completely anew together. Our separate histories were histories lived in Christ by his friends. Separated they were and long lasting, but they were really only temporarily separated. Christ could never let such a break be permanent or irrevocable. It was ever only a matter of time. We may have forgotten that we were friends, but he did not.

This unwillingness I am expressing to ever stop using the word “friend” about fellow Christians, either in our own community or in other Christian communities, is not motivated by some kind of romantic or moralistic extension of the word. Rather, it is because the word means something different when it is friends of Christ and friends in Christ about whom we are speaking. He makes the difference.

If we have ever reconciled, or been party to the reconciliation of friends or of spouses, we may have heard people say once love has begun to grow again, how wrong they were about each other. I think that is what happens to Christian communities which re-claim their friendship in Christ. They realize they have been very wrong about each other, even for centuries. This doesn't mean that the differences that have developed over the decades are not serious obstacles to re-establishing completely their relationship. It does mean that differences can be dealt with now in the context of a newly reclaimed relationship of friendship in Christ and through Christ. We had forgotten that we were his friends.

In that same homily in Bern on Trinity Sunday, from which I quoted in the first bible study, Pope John Paul II called Catholics to recognize that their own unity with each other was an essential part of their commitment to ecumenism:

“It is certain, however, that a strong contribution to the ecumenical cause derives from the commitment of Catholics to living inner unity. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, I stressed the need ‘to make the Church *the home and the school of communion*’ (n.43), keeping the eyes of the heart fixed ‘on the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us’ (*ibid.*). In this way we foster that ‘spirituality of communion’ which, departing from the places where people and Christians are formed, reaches the parishes, associations and movements. A local Church in which the spirituality of communion flourishes will be able to *purify herself constantly from the ‘toxins’ of selfishness* that give rise to jealousy, diffidence, manias for self-affirmation and harmful contrasts.”

What the Pope said concerning Catholics living together in unity as serving the ecumenical movement is true surely for all Christian communities. The development in each of our communities of what he calls “a spirituality of communion” is not just important for our own community, but for all other Christian communities. It is impossible to be sincerely ecumenical and not committed to unity within one's own congregation, diocese, presbytery, denomination or church. Likewise, it is inconceivable that one could be committed to one's “friends” within one's own community and ignore or reject the friends outside it who still belong to Christ.

The words of Jesus in this Last Supper discourse are addressed to us here at the National Council of Churches Forum: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you

..... I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father. You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Jesus says that equally to Orthodox Christians, Congregationalists, Anglicans, Baptists, Salvation Army, Lutherans, Catholics, Uniting Church, Friends, Churches of Christ and Seventh Day Adventists. The National Council of Churches Forum is a gathering of his friends. Our task is to listen to each other as his friends and to look for him with and within each other.

Bishop Michael Putney