
I Have Called You Friends

John 15: 9-17

A sermon preached at the Induction of 37 Nazareth Companions on November 16 2020 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Late at night, after the Last Supper, after washing the disciples' feet, after Judas has left, Jesus gets the eleven to gather round, and decides it's time to tell them the secret of everything. Jesus, in the half-light, says, 'See that candle and its tiny flame that lights this whole room? There's something as fragile and precious as that candle that's at the heart of everything.'

And what is that secret? Why do we have this world, tucked away at an obscure corner of an unimaginably large universe? Because God wanted creatures to *be with*; to share life and joy and discovery with. Why did God under Moses lead the children of Israel out of Egypt? So they could be fully alive and enjoy God's company. Why did God make a covenant with them on Mt Sinai? So everyone could know what being God's friends entailed. At Mt Sinai God said, 'You mean everything to me and I mean everything to you.'

Creation, liberation, covenant. The three great themes of the Old Testament. But all of that was preparation – for this moment right now. At the last supper Jesus declares himself to be the new creation, the ultimate liberation and the fulfilment of the covenant. And all three are contained in one word: friendship. Jesus is the one who's fully human, able to be God's friend like never before. And Jesus is the one who's fully divine, able to be our friend like no one else. And this disclosure comes at the Last Supper, while breaking bread together, because a companion is a person with whom you break bread. This moment is what the whole universe was created for – that God would be our companion, breaking bread together as friends, now and forever.

It's a deceptively simple word, friendship. It sounds like the most straightforward thing in the world. Yet we shrink from making friendships. Why? Because friendships break, and because friendships die. When friendships break there's hurt and pain. When friendships die there's bereavement and loneliness.

On Good Friday friendships broke and friendships died. There was betrayal, denial, abandonment – the things that break friendship. And there was execution, terrible loss – the things that kill friendship.'

But on Easter Sunday, Jesus showed that friendship with God is forever. He took all the things that break friendship, and transformed them. We call it the forgiveness of sins. And then he took all the things that kill friendship, and turned them upside down. We call it everlasting life. People hold back from friendship because of the prison of the past and the fear of the future. The resurrection liberates our past through forgiveness and frees our future through eternal life.

Jesus says, 'I do not call you servants any longer; I have called you friends.' He's saying, 'God doesn't want servants. That's not a voluntary relationship. God wants friends. That's why I'm laying down my life: to show how much God wants you as friends; and to show that nothing, nothing at all, will stop God being your companion, now and forever.' That's what we remember, every time we break bread. We're liberated from the past through forgiveness and offered the gift of the future through eternal life. We're made God's companions; God's friends. That's what Jesus came to show us, to tell us, to embody and to make possible. That's the secret of everything.