

FRIENDSHIP AND COMPANIONSHIP

PREACHER : Canon Ralph Godsall, Precentor

Evensong at 3.15pm on Saturday 29th July 2006
attended by the Diocesan Retired Clergy Association.

Today the Church of England remembers in its calendar, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Companions of our Lord. It's a very suitable day on which to welcome to the Cathedral members of the Diocesan Retired Clergy Association. It's a day when the importance of companionship and friendship in the Christian life (and in our fellowship one with another) is high on the Church's public agenda. It is a day for offering hospitality – the hospitality of God in worship and the hospitality of this Cathedral Church to those who have so faithfully served the Church in the ordained ministry down the years.

The gospels of Luke and John variously describe how Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus gave Jesus hospitality at their home at Bethany outside Jerusalem. Jesus is said to have loved all three. After Lazarus' death he wept and was moved by the sisters' grief. He brought Lazarus back from the dead that the glory of God might be revealed. It was Martha who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, while Mary washed his feet with costly oil. On another occasion, Mary was commended by Jesus for her attentiveness to his teaching while Martha served. For this, Mary is traditionally taken to be an example of the contemplative spiritual life and Martha an example of the active spiritual life.

Friendship and companionship clearly meant a great deal to Jesus and to the writers of the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament there are Proverbs on friendship, and purple passages like David's lament for Jonathan. But when you steep your self in the Gospels, in the friendships of Jesus, particularly in the Fourth Gospel, you know you have been led near to the heart of friendship. In this afternoon's second reading (John 15: 9-17) Jesus chooses to describe his relationship with his disciples one of friendship. 'I have called you friends', he says.

One of the great Christian classics on friendship was written in this country by Aelred of Rievaulx. Aelred was born into the family of a Saxon priest at Hexham, and spent much of his early years at the court of King David of Scotland. He became Abbot of Rievaulx in 1147, and undoubtedly had a genius for friendship. What distinguished Aelred from other writers is a daring phrase in which he changes what St John had written: 'God is love' into 'God is friendship'; and he adds: 'He who abides in friendship abides in God, and God in him.'

Part of the underlying frustration and ache of being alive is caused by the fact of growing old. In the west we seem to have the idea of life as a cycle of physical growth followed by physical decline and decay. Shakespeare gave this view classic expression. First the baby mewling and puking, then the schoolboy with shining morning face, the lover, the soldier, the mature man, then – decline to lean and slippered pantaloons with spectacles on nose, shrunk shank and treble voice.

Perhaps it's a fair description of our outward changes, but one which totally fails to capture anything of the Christian dimension to this process. If this were the whole story about retirement and old age it would be a depressing theme, but it isn't. When newly-ordained I visited quite a number of older people. I remember being struck by how a particular personality, or character, to use an old fashioned word, had achieved such stature that it shone like a light in a room otherwise dark and dingy. I went with the job of bringing a little comfort and cheer. I came away with a sense that it was I who was the beneficiary of the visit.

Not always of course. There is no automatic relationship between growing old and growing spiritually. If it is possible to grow old gracefully, it is also possible to grow old with bitterness and resentment, clinging to illusions and isolated in a hood of pride. An anonymous 17th century writer once wrote:

'Lord, thou knowest better than I know myself that I am getting older and will some day be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all, but thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.'

'Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by.'

'I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.'

'Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint, but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, and talents in unexpected people. And give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.'

And, as T.S.Eliot once wrote,

'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.'

How starkly does old age reveal whether or not we have acquired this wisdom!

But, returning to the theme of companionship and friendship, let me end with one of the finest oblique descriptions of human friendship ever written. It is the story of Mole, Rat, Badger and Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*. Who can forget that description of dawn on the river bank? In the silence of the growing daylight, as Nature is flushed with colour, Rat turns and whispers to Mole, his eyes, we are told, 'shining with unutterable love'. That description of companionship as between animals makes it possible to describe it at all. Toad and Mole, we all know, are not animals. They are us!

'Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean some august Presence was very, very near.' He raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the immanent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fullness and incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper..... "Rat!" he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?" "Afraid?" murmured Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid of Him? O never, never! And yet – and yet – O Mole, I am afraid!" Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.'