

6th Sunday of Easter

Recently I spent a few days in Prague with three priest friends – my Easter break. Two I have known for over thirty years, one for over twenty. Prague is a beautiful city and we were blessed with cloudless skies and a temperature that rose from day to day but more important was time spent together. As we go through life we gradually lose touch with some friends or perhaps it continues at the level of a Christmas card or occasional letter just as we make new friends at different points in life. If we are fortunate we reach our later years with one or two friends still from our schooldays or university. I have one close friend from university. He lives in Germany so we only see each other about once a year but we were both there for each other at our parents' deaths. I baptised one of his children and am godparent to another. Friendship is important for all of us. The intimacy of friendship is intended by God to be at the heart of marriage. In Genesis Adam was alone in the splendour of God's creation until at last Eve was created and he could say "This is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone."

Today Jesus says to you and to me, "I call you friends". The basis of his friendship is love and mutual trust. "I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father." The disciples have been with him for three years. He has invited them to travel round with him so that they can get to know him. He has been to their homes and eaten with them. During that period he has revealed himself to them little by little – through his teaching and miracles and through shared meals. He has gradually introduced them to the Father. Remember his words, "Philip, to have seen me is to have seen the Father." In a few days he will give his life on the cross for them: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends." Later he will appear to them in the upper room and enter them in a new and powerful way through the coming down of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Jesus invites us to a true friendship and makes us part of his family through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We become not just friends but brothers and sisters in the Lord. We are here today as privileged members of his family and circle of friends. The Mass is the way in which we celebrate that presence of the Lord in our midst. If we see the Mass purely in terms of an obligation or duty we have lost sight not only of what the Mass is – the living presence of Christ in our midst under the outward appearances of bread and wine – but the love and friendship that is at the heart of what it is to be a Christian and a Catholic. We are here to open our hearts to him in love and prayer: "the Father will give you anything you ask him in my name". The Mass will be real and alive to us only when we realise what it is really all about. We are at the last supper, at the foot of the cross, in the upper room at Easter just as surely as the disciples were. The Lord has given his life for you and for me as the ultimate sign of love.

This friendship is not just for ourselves. Jesus wants to draw others into his circle of friends. "I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit." There is a saying. "To have friends you need to be a friend." Jesus tells us, "Love one another as I have loved you." Friendship is an essential social virtue – it is also an essential part of what it is to be fully human and a member of God's family. Perhaps we should allow today's Gospel to challenge us. Are our friendships really like this? Are we open – do others trust us to keep their secrets and respect them despite their weaknesses and failings? Do we damage that trust and the reputation of others by gossip? Do we treat people as 'friends' only for what they can do for us? Who would give his or her life for you – and would you do the same for them? We are not perfect – we know that Jesus' friends let him down at the crucial moment of his arrest and trial, but he did not abandon them. The wounds he suffered became their means of healing and renewal. As we reflect on what his friendship really means, let us ask the Lord today to help us to be better friends to those around us.