

6th Sunday of Easter, 2021

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Major events in our common human life are like a mirror. They hold up to us a great deal about ourselves – both good and bad. Think of two recent instances:

The death of the Duke of Edinburgh

The current covid pandemic

When Prince Philip died the ceremonial was inevitably muted by the current restrictions on gatherings. But the message which came across from the public coverage and the many comments on his life and contribution to our national life were all to do with the example he set of fidelity and constancy – his unswerving commitment to the Queen and to the life of this nation, to the Commonwealth, to the flourishing of young people and to the care of the natural environment. In the context of our times and particularly of the political figures who dominate the news, he demonstrated values which are in short supply and at times apparently old-fashioned – particularly putting others before himself. I felt there was a hankering among many people for more like him: more people of faith and fidelity.

Or think of the wider covid pandemic and the way that has been a mirror to many societies round the world, not least our own. The uneven incidence of infection, serious illness and death has shown up differences and inequalities in our own society we might prefer to forget in the comfort of a University city. The pandemic has called out some of the very best in people – as they have cared for the sick and dying, the elderly isolated from their loved ones, as they have volunteered to help those isolated by themselves, and to help with the rollout of the vaccines. But it has also shown up profound selfishness and disregard for the wider society – among those who have deliberately ignored the restrictions on social gatherings, or attacked those whose job it has been to enforce the restrictions.

Our gospel reading today is placed by the writer of John's gospel in the final teachings of Jesus just before his crucifixion – surely one of the most lifechanging events in our human history. With this as the backdrop, the mirror, one might say, Jesus's teaching is totally counter cultural. He draws a verbal picture of human relationships, not as

they are but as how they should be – in the light of the reciprocal love of the Father and himself, and his love for his disciples. It is an outpouring of divine love which will be demonstrated in his self-offering on the cross. The teaching continues directly from the imagery of Christ as the true vine which we considered last Sunday. Christ pictured himself as the vine and the Father as the ever-active vine-grower: together they are the source of life-giving grace which in turn bring fruitfulness to the branches of the vine. Now he turns to the ideas of friendship and love.

We don't often these days talk about friendship in a Christian context, and perhaps particularly not about friendship with God. It sounds a bit presumptuous. But here quite plainly Christ says to his closest followers in their last hours together before his death that they are his friends: he calls them friends, not servants or slaves. In his world people would have thought deeply about friendship. Aristotle was one ancient philosopher who analysed friendship and thought that at its best it was a profound virtue. (See his *Nicomachean Ethics*.) Philo of Alexandria, a near contemporary of Jesus and a Jewish philosopher, wrote of wise men as friends of God. In the Old Testament Abraham and Moses are both called friends of God. But in this gospel quite clearly the friendship is the result of divine initiative. Christ has chosen these men as his friends to go out into the world and bear fruit from their profound connection with him.

As we emerge from the Paschal season into what is called "Ordinary time" – but is of course far from ordinary – it may be helpful to reflect on our Christian lives as friendship with God. Friends eat and drink together to celebrate and deepen their relationship. They keep each other company and do together things they both enjoy and find significant. They listen to each other and talk together. They share their joys and sorrows, their hopes and their fears and anxieties. Is this how we relate to God? But of course there is another and distinctive dimension to our calling to be friends of Christ – and that is not just that the initiative is entirely his. Friendship with him is also based on keeping his commandments. We are in a very real sense in so doing to become like him, to do as he does. Or using St. Paul's striking metaphor (Romans 13: 14) we are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ's love for the Father, the Father's Love for him, and the outpouring of that love on his world, and particularly on his friends, is the mirror which shows us how human life should be – how it should be when it is redeemed and men and women are recreated in the image of God. Love should be the basis of human society – not honour, wealth, or status. We don't need reminding of the ways in which humans have over the course of their history constructed societies based on values other than love. Christians have wrestled with this and some have literally fled from their environment to try to construct societies based on Christ's values. The Desert Mothers and Fathers were one such group, fleeing city life and its temptations. Centuries later Teresa of Avila founded reformed Carmelite religious houses to create an alternative culture to 16th century Spain – challenge the surrounding society based on ideas of honour, as if social status could have anything to do with one's relationship with God. In our own times there are Christians who flee into closed worlds of Christian observance. The Amish people in the US are a living example.

But our gospel reading I think shows Jesus urging his friends to work out his love in the world around them, not to flee from it. They are to bear fruit in the world, just as Christ had in his life time transformed human lives and relationships around him. So involved was he in the real world that the religious purists of his day complained of the company he kept - sinners, tax collectors, women of dubious reputation. They complained that he healed people on God's own day, the Sabbath. Greek-speakers of the world in which Jesus lived had many different words for love – family love, love of friends, romantic love among them. But the word which was specifically used by Christians and by the gospel writers was *agape* – a love which was personified in Christ's own love. It means outpouring, selfless, unconditional love, concerned with the good of the other. As Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" The Greek word used by the writer is the verbal form of *agape*. Christ's friends are asked to love as he has – and does – love.

As we come to his holy table, to the altar where we show forth his self-offering in bread and wine, we are called to be friends of Christ, those who in turn show his love for the world.