

## Easter 6 Year B 2021

Have you ever noticed how slippery words can be? You think you know the meaning of a word and then find it can mean something completely different. Take a simple word like FAST - we all know what that means - fast means quick, or even quicker than quick, but it can also mean stuck. When used as a derogatory adjective, it can mean of low morals - 'running fast, the fast woman got stuck fast in the mud' - did you ever hear of a fast man? Thought not - even our language can be misogynistic! Very slippery, words! But not only do words change their meaning, the context in which they are spoken can change the meaning. 'How are you?' spoken to someone you haven't seen for a while is simply a form of greeting. 'How are you?' to someone in hospital is an inquiry about health or progress. 'How are you?' spoken to someone recently bereaved or made redundant is an expression of concern.

With that in mind, let us think about the Gospel of St John, which we have been reading throughout the Easter season. When we read John's Gospel we are, it first appears, on the surface at least, reading an immediate story line - the unfolding narrative of Jesus' teaching, ministry, healings- this is what was said, this is what happened - but we are also, under the surface, reading

about the community for which John wrote his Gospel, the circumstances surrounding that community, and what the story line meant for them, some three generations or so after the events which John describes. So, two contexts - the same words would sound as, and mean, different things in each context. Let's look at 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' If we read that in the first context, ongoing story line, we think of Jesus knowing that his hour has come, death is impending, Jesus is about to make the ultimate sacrifice for his friends. But if we read those words in the context of John's community, as it encounters conflict, opposition, persecution, at the end of the first century CE, those words seem to apply not only to Jesus but to the sacrifice which will be required of members of this little church family. It is not, of course, either/or. Both situations apply. We do not have to choose one understanding over the other. Faith grows, deepens, is reinterpreted as the years roll by.

Jesus goes on to say 'You are my friends, if you do what I command you'. What did that mean to the first small group of disciples who first heard those words? He is about to leave them and yet, for the first time he calls them his friends. They are at

their most vulnerable and frightened, they are about to deny and desert him, yet he invites them into mutual commitment and affection - what a gift, but are they up to accepting?

When the community of John heard those words they could have heard them as a call to shoulder the responsibility of remaining faithful, even in the face of mounting pressure.

And what do these words mean for us today - our third context?

What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus, no longer a servant, someone busy about the Lord's work? It is sometimes said that you can judge a person by their friends, the company they keep.

So whose company do we keep - or would we keep if we were allowed company? There are those whose friendship we might cultivate because they are useful to us, they know the right contacts, open the right doors, make the right connections, engineer the right contracts. Is that what friendship with Jesus is like? Someone it is convenient to know, because he might have a word for you with his Father?

Other people we become friends with, because we enjoy their company; their company is pleasurable. Do you enjoy being with Jesus, or is prayer, worship, service a 'Christian Duty', something you do because you feel you ought to - like a servant serving his

master out of a sense of duty? And then there is friendship for the sake of friendship, friendship which requires time, presence, attention - deep friendship, the best kind, friendship which is slow to mature, offered and reciprocated, expressed often in silence rather than in words - as D H Lawrence puts it -

'Like a cat asleep on a chair

At peace, in peace

And at one with the master of the house'. (1)

And finally, let us consider these words of Jesus. - 'You did not choose me, but I choose you'. For the disciples on that night, as everything was about to unravel, it would be a reminder that they were held by a divine purpose much greater than their individual power of choice. Only one chose not to be chosen, not to be a friend (and he has already left the upper room).

For John's persecuted community, knowing that they had been chosen by Christ might give them the assurance they needed to stand steadfast as they faced increasing opposition.

And for us, living in a culture which celebrates self-autonomy and choice, which rejects commandments of any kind as contrary to civil liberty and self-interest - 'I know my rights!' - perhaps these words call us back from 'me, me, me' to an awareness of

God's initiative in seeking us out, calling us, gathering us into a community, into a family, in order to send us out into the world to bear much fruit.

The church is not just a building in which individuals gather on Sunday morning for worship, the church is a gathering of the friends of Jesus willing to lay down their lives (in whatever sense), following the command of Jesus to love one another, even as he loved, even as he loves, us. This might take quite a bit of pruning, as we learn to be a community with no doors - no doors to shut ourselves in for fear of - the other, of contamination, criticism, fear of being asked to put faith into action; no doors to prevent the entry of others because they don't belong, don't conform, don't suit. Peter learnt that in today's first reading (as Philip did in the first reading last Sunday). The Holy Spirit is no respecter of doors or barriers. No wonder Peter's companions, the circumcised believers, were astounded.

Are we astounded when we read the Gospel? Do we hear the Gospel as a record of what happened or as a commentary on what happened, what was said, designed to help the communities for which they were written, or do we hear Jesus speaking to us today. 'You did not choose me, I chose you. You are my friends if

you do what I command you. A new commandment I give to you.

Love one another'

Love one another.

(1) Pax. D H Lawrence