

NORT BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 13 MAY 2012

EASTER 6

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John 15: 9-17

Psalm 98

Reflection: *I have called you friends.....John 15: 15*

Today's passage is taken from the "last discourse". An address that Jesus, according to the gospel of John, gives to his disciples at the last supper. It is a goodbye speech full of admonishments and advice, where we see Jesus trying to impress his disciples with his core teachings before he dies.

It is highly unlikely Jesus ever gave this speech in the form it has come to us, in these lengthy and involved words. And most scholars agree that chapter 15 wasn't even in the initial version of the gospel of John, but was added later by a "school" of Johannine teachers. We don't know to what extent they used words they knew came from Jesus to compose this magnificent piece of text, or how much of their own words and experiences ended up mixed in with it. But it is pretty certain that by the time these words were written those who regarded themselves as Jesus' friends were in a very different situation from those who sat around the table of the last supper with him.

That Johannine community is shrouded in mystery by the way, and it is only from vague references and ambiguous clues in the text that we can reconstruct who and what they were.

From what we find in allusions and references in the text we are pretty confident that they were a struggling community, who found it difficult to hold on to their faith and to each other. Apart from persecution by the Roman authorities, they'd had a fight with their Jewish brothers and sisters who did not accept Jesus as their Messiah and been kicked out of the synagogue. And they were still hurting from that. The gospel of John is very negative about the Jewish community in places, something that has had terrible consequences for Jewish/Christian relationships ever since the gospel was written and accepted as part of the Christian Canon. Most scholars now understand that negativity as an expression of the pain the deep rift opening up between the two communities in the second century caused. The Johannine community is struggling with that pain, with its identity, with the loss of others whom they considered as close family members, with a loss of confidence in community. They'd had a nasty family break up and they were struggling to come to terms with it.

That's the context against which we need to read today's passage. Not as a general exhortation to be nice to each other, but as the confused, pain laden words of a community trying to come to terms with a break up, and struggling to hang on to each other. There must have been a lot of strife with some in one camp, others in the other camp and many caught in between wavering. Tempers must have been short, people easily offended, misunderstandings galore. Take the time around the amalgamation and take it to the nth degree I imagine. Or for those of you who have experience of divorce: you'll know what it looks or feels like when families break up and end up scattered in little sub-groups who find it difficult to relate to each other across the rifts that have opened up.

When Jewish and Christian groups started going their own ways in the second century it was like that: pain, bitterness, insecurity, loss of confidence, grief, anger, and a whole lot of other confusing and confused emotions wreaking havoc in people's lives and in their relationships. While they were, at the same time, under a lot of pressure from a hostile outside environment.

It is from that context their teachers write the gospel and project words of Jesus back in time to the last supper. Another time of confusion and uncertainty. Another time of parting, of lacking in understanding of the issues at stake, of fear for the future, of deep insecurity.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete".

So in other words: You'll recover your balance if you model your life on mine. Stay with me, and keep my commandments, that is all you have to do.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

Imagine that being said in a community that was struggling to love each other, to stay with the way Christ had shown, that struggled to keep giving of themselves to a community that no longer felt safe and strong and confident in itself. Imagine this said to a community that was falling apart with the outside world gloating over what was happening to them! Imagine this text being written down against a backdrop of suspicion and distrust inside the community, of bitter disputes and painful clashes, of people being unpleasant and rude about little things because they were insecure about the bigger things. Imagine a Christian community that was losing membership, with everyone blaming someone else for what was happening, with small groups splintering in every direction, forming and reforming, Jewish or Christian or any possible combination of the two. That was what was happening!

Love one another as I have loved you! Try doing that when someone keeps moving the furniture in your house Church. Try doing that when the routines of your Church community keep changing and it is getting on your nerves. Try doing that when some hold other "truths" than others. Try doing that when there is discussion about just about every little aspect of the faith, every little aspect of doctrine, liturgy, teaching, socialising, serving, community building. I can tell you it's not easy.

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

Here the image of the court of a Hellenistic King is introduced. An image the Johannine community would have been familiar with wherever they lived in the ancient world. The King's son brings his friends home and shares with them about his father. Stories about his father's bravery, his generosity, his moral uprightness, his justice, his righteousness. He brings them inside the household and introduces them to his father and they become part of the special relationship the King-father has with his son. There were few things more sacred in the ancient world than the relation between a King and his Son, and any

friends that Son introduced into the household became part of a very special relationship as a consequence. Friends of the son. In a household like that there would also have been a multitude of slaves. And although they would be close enough to the father and the son in a physical sense, they were in a very different position from the friends. They didn't know. They weren't intimate. They did not have access to the insights the son and his friends were party to.

I have called you friends.... I wonder what that means in a Church context. To be friends of Jesus. To be people who are "in the know". To be people who, in the middle of all the upheaval and confusion of this world are part of something special, have been "chosen".

It struck me that the gospel turns on its head the way we usually see this. We are not the ones choosing. We are not the ones offering ourselves to be Jesus' friends. We find ourselves no longer servants but friends because he chooses us. We find ourselves knowing, understanding, infected with knowledge that changes our being, that draws us into a sacred circle of love. Self-giving love. Knowledge that is not always comfortable, or pleasant to be infected with. Knowledge that will open our eyes to the world the way God sees it.

You may have experience of such knowledge. Of things, insights, experiences that have changed your view of the world, the way you operate, the way you conduct your life towards God's view.

For me there have been many such instances over the years that have guided me and pushed me in directions I would otherwise perhaps not have gone. Many of those faith related, but not all.

Recently the talk Michele Harris gave about the Government intervention in Aboriginal communities was such an instance where the gaining of knowledge has changed the way I view the world, the government, what I understand about this country. In this case it is knowledge that is painful and uncomfortable and makes me feel powerless and angry. But it has made me see with God's eyes: injustice, suffering, pain inflicted on our soil, in the name of our government.

There are other more positive instances as well: the discovery that meditation and prayer are gaining more and more ground as a means of healing in modern medicine and science has encouraged me and inspired me to continue on a path I have been on for quite a while already.

Both of these insights, this learning, this gaining of understanding has taken me deeper into that which I think the gospel is referring to here: being given knowledge and insight that deepens our understanding and relationship of that which is of God, brings us closer to what is of Christ.

And like it was at a Hellenistic court, as friends of Christ we have an obligation to take an interest in what is of his Father and of him. To make it our own and let ourselves be drawn into their proximity more and more. That's what the Son is after, that is what the Father longs for: the friends of the Son coming home and sharing in the household of love, giving of themselves in the same way the Son does and together making the world around them a better place.

Strife and discord can't be part of such a household, although it always will be, as long as the world is the broken place it is.

Love one another says John, because I love you. I chose you, I appointed you to bear fruit. Remember that next time you get into each other's hair, you're both my friends, I chose you both, even though you may not like each other, or find it difficult to love each other, you are mine and I have invited you both into that sacred bond I have with my Father. To love, to abide, to stay with what is worth pursuing, to become more and more intimate with what will further cause righteousness and justice, peace and wholeness to heal the earth.

Not an easy love, not an insignificant love, but the self-giving love of Christ is what we are called to stay with. No matter what.

And as our Father, or perhaps on this Sunday it is more appropriate to speak about our Mother, as a parent then, Jesus promises, God will be there to nurture, support and encourage that love with the knowledge and understanding we need to grow and abide in it.

Amen.