

Easter 6, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Acts 10:44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15: 9-17

## Easter Faith: From Ordinary Friendship to Extraordinary Friendship

### Introduction

*When we all get to heaven  
What a day of rejoicing that will be  
When we all see Jesus  
We'll sing and shout for victory*

Set in the back-blocks of Mississippi, the victims of constant and systematic racism, this community of Afro-American Christians of the 1960s – it could be today - sing joyfully of a future. What *stands out* is the friendship that holds them together, the source and ground of which, is Jesus Christ. What is stunning, *utterly stunning*, is that these people dare to befriend their persecutors – their vision and hope is dramatically inclusive even of them - “*When we all see Jesus*”. Then, all will be overcome, then, all will sing and shout together in celebration. Friendship becomes extraordinary friendship.

How so? Are these people simply stupid? Simple headed? What is it about their experience of Jesus Christ, their experience of God, that allows such generosity, even as they are about to be attacked, abused, killed by their ‘social betters’, their white masters?

I want to briefly look at this *question of friendship* this morning, that screams out from our final readings from Easter. I want to do three things: first examine our Gospel reading; second cast an eye over our reading from Acts: and third, draw some conclusions about Easter Faith.

### The Gospel

Last week, we heard the first part of this Gospel reading: that which invited the members of John’s Christian community to “remain” or dwell in Jesus. Today we hear a parallel invitation which explains what remaining in Jesus means: it is “remain in my love”. There is then a definition of what being a follower of Jesus requires – the ethical action of loving stimulated, made possible by dwelling in Christ.

But there is more to be said, than just this. In the Gospel of John there is a difference about the way the readiness to love, the capacity for love is understood, when contrasted with much of the New Testament. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and even more clearly in the writings of the apostle Paul, the ethical action of loving the other, is connected with self-denial. Paul in fact uses a special word for this: *kenosis* – or *self-emptying*. But John has another take altogether, another way of seeing the action of loving. For John, it is all about joy, the joy of giving oneself. For John the act of love is something to be celebrated as an expression of one’s fullness, it is an act not of denying oneself, but instead the opposite: *coming to oneself*. So, we love due to the joy of our lives grounded and founded in Christ. Loving is about the sense of having found our vocation, our meaning in life.

If we trace this joy back a little further, we find why the Christian is essentially joyful: it is because God does not want us as his slaves, but as his companions, *his friends*. It is in the *joy of friendship with God* that we are motivated, inspired, encouraged. If we go back a little further again, in John’s reasoning, we find that this joy due to us being God’s friends, is due to *our being chosen*. So, there is line of reasoning here unique to John’s Gospel: **We are chosen**

**by God in Christ, to become God's companions or friends. In becoming God's friends, there is a joy to life, and that joy issues in, results in, imaginative, concrete actions of love.**

So, the emphasis in John is wholly positive. His language is neither morbid, dark, or gloomy, nor moralistic or pharisaical. It is happy, jubilant, ecstatic. *To love is fun.*

### **The Acts**

But if *to love is fun*, because we are companions of Jesus, it is also *dramatic*. As we turn to the story of Peter's experience in the Book of Acts, we find there is an invitation to him to be changed – to experience a transformation in world-view, a revolution in mental construct, a conversion, a 180-degree turn, in how he sees and relates to others. Peter had never dreamed of crossing the threshold of the home of a non-Jew, of someone who is unclean...and yet he does, visiting the home of the centurion Cornelius. There he observes the Holy Spirit, *the great democratising force of human history*, descending upon those whom he, Peter, had considered outsiders, rejects...mere Gentiles. In the end, Peter, the impeccably religious one, the 'loyal' follower of Jesus, had to see things anew, had to experience the joy of God, so he could break through his social bigotry, his political narrowness, and his creedal short-sightedness. Peter is totally knocked off balance, having to rethink the meaning of his commitment to Jesus.

### **Application**

Jean Louis Chretien is a French philosopher and poet who currently teaches at the Sorbonne, Paris. Chretien speaks of "call"; the call God makes to us. He says that as we embrace God's call, that call embraces us. He goes on and explains, that in the process of answering God's call, we are and should be, destabilized, knocked off balance, disrupted, but then re-made. He concludes, "In Jesus' calling of me, I am not left intact. The call surges, only by opening a space in me, and shattering something of what I was before. Only then, do I become a friend, an extraordinary friend of God's and an extraordinary friend to others, others whom I would never have considered in the past. Through Jesus, my circle of friends grows."

I think this is what we are called to be and to do...Easter Faith in Jesus Christ challenges us to live as his friends, constantly and joyfully *knocked off balance*, constantly and joyfully remade, becoming *extraordinary friends* to others. Let's be a community of extraordinary friendship!