

## Reflection for Sunday 9 May

According to Aristotle, community is the essence of friendship and friends' goods are common property. When we bought our cottage in South West France over thirty years ago, Aristotle's ideas held sway almost totally. Our garden tools and even our barn were happily commandeered by our neighbour Paul whenever he felt the need, but in return, we'd be showered with fruit and veg in season.

He'd often wander into our kitchen to find us if he wanted something, or to give us a huge bowl of tomatoes, seldom bothering to knock, which could be tricky early in the morning, given that our bathroom was downstairs too. It has to be said that as other Brits made their way to the village, some of them found this behaviour all very odd. They soon erected tall fences around their gardens to afford them some privacy. Their French neighbours were mystified – and just a bit hurt. Aristotle was not an Englishman and saw castles in a very different light.

The Aristotelian concept of friendship was clearly more congenial to Jesus, along with other prevailing ideas of the time that friendship should embrace agreement, harmony, openness, good will, affection and, perhaps, most important of all, trust. In short, there was a refreshing notion in Greek and Roman society that good character and virtuous living was the necessary cement that bound friends and communal life together. Or at least, even if it didn't always work in practice, it was an ideal well worth aspiring to.

There's not a lot more that the Old Testament adds about friendship that might have inspired Jesus to form an understanding of friendship that differed significantly from that which Aristotle and others had laid out. The common thinking of the day forms the backdrop to Jesus's teaching about friendship, which those who first encountered it would have taken almost for granted.

Jesus seems to accept that these assumptions are the perfectly proper and necessary foundation of true friendship. What he does do, however, is to break most normal conventions by first extending his call to friendship to everyone and then, by deeds rather than words, shows us just how deep and powerful true friendship can and should be. And then finally, and most remarkably, he insists that we can be friends with God – a claim that has the most startling and far-reaching consequences for us all.

Let's look at these in a moment. First, it's probably worth noting that if there is any additional biblical idea that might colour Jesus's understanding of friendship, it's that of covenant. The relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament is sealed by a covenant that demanded certain behaviours, but most especially loyalty, faithfulness and obedience in return for God's special favour and protection. It was

like a treaty between two states and was not necessarily, or indeed seldom, between equals.

Jesus's understanding of covenant is very different. It would not have passed muster in earlier and different circumstances, because he insists that our relationship with God is entirely un-earned. We don't have to sign up to anything first. We don't have to prove our worth, instead it's offered to us as a free, but astonishingly priceless gift.

This puts us on a wholly different footing with God, which is where Jesus's words about friendship and servanthood really begin to bite. Servants, or indeed slaves (the words used here may mean either) do not enjoy an equal relationship with their owners or employers. They may be dismissed or sold. They may be entrusted with a lot, but they do not need to be told everything. This is not what Jesus offers. Rather he insists that if he – and God – wish us to be friends rather than servants, nothing is hidden from us. God will be totally open and honest with us. There is no veil between us.

God's openness and honesty is shown by Jesus himself, his life, words and actions. And curiously and most significantly, of course, these include acts of service and self-giving that shatters all normal conventions and boundaries.

This is all so remarkable that it's hard to comprehend. The effect of it, however, is easier to take to heart. It's as if a series of dominoes begins to fall: we can do nothing to earn God's friendship; God chooses to hide nothing from us; God chooses to trust us; God chooses to be utterly open with us, and as Jesus reveals that the only thing that ultimately counts is love, then this surely must have a profound affect on how we see one another too. All we are called by Jesus to do, as his friends, is to love one another. And that's where the real fun starts.

In short, to put love into action is to dare to trust one another completely, because God trusts us. It's as simple and as profoundly challenging as that. And, of course, curiously too, whilst we may not be slaves or servants, the best way we can show our love for one – and our deepest friendship for another - lies in acts of service, just as Jesus had just shown, according to John's Gospel, by washing his disciples' feet.

In practice, the challenge for us remains to avoid the temptation to erect garden fences around our lives that no-one can see over unless we choose to allow them. This isn't the kind of friendship Jesus teaches.

It remains up to us to work out what Jesus really means in our context. It may just begin by sharing the fruits of your garden, or your wheelbarrow, but you never quite know where it might end. It seems that old Aristotle got it right: community really is the essence of friendship. Love one another, said Jesus, as I have loved you.