

JOHN 15.4: LET'S DEVELOP OUR FRIENDSHIP WITH JESUS

[Chelmsford 27 February 2011]

1. JESUS WANTS US TO BE FRIENDS

There are friends – and there are friends.

There are fair-weather friends, who are there when life is good – and there are real friends, who are there for you when the bottom falls out of your world.

There are friends with whom you can have a good gossip – and there are friends whom you can call up at two o'clock in the morning for help

Jesus is a true friend – he remains a true friend when other friends may desert us. He is there not just in the good times, but in the tough times.

Why? Because he loves us.

Listen to Jesus: **“The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them. And you are my friends”** (John 15.11,12).

Jesus loves us – he loves you and he loves me – and it is precisely because he loves us that he gave his life for us on the Cross of Calvary.

The point, however, that I wish to draw out is that for Jesus, *love is the basis for friendship*. Listen again to the words of Jesus: **“The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them. And you are my friends”**.

Jesus calls his disciples ‘friends’ – he loved his friends so much that he gave his life for them.

A friend by definition is one who loves and is loved. Indeed, the Greek word for ‘friend’ (*philos*) is derived from a Greek word ‘to love’ (*phileo*).

When I first came to Chelmsford, I used to ask people: ‘*Who are your friends in the church?*’ To my surprise many answered that question as if I had asked ‘*Who do you know? Who are your acquaintances?*’

But true friendship is not knowing a person, it is loving a person.

And what a difference that makes. For where there is love, there is acceptance.

It has been said: *“Your friend is the man who knows all about you, and still likes you”* (Elbert Hubbard). Or somebody else has said: *“To find a friend one must close one eye. To keep him – two”* (Norman Douglas).

Jesus is that kind of friend.

Yes, he is that kind of friend to us – he is that kind of friend to all those who have responded to his call and seek to follow him.

He knows us through and through: he knows your frailties; he knows my frailties.

He knows us warts & all. And yet he loves us – he is the best of friends.

“You are my friends” says Jesus (John 15.12).

What a wonderful statement. Savour it, think hard about it – Jesus calls you and me his friends. What an amazing privilege! Here we discover not just that Jesus loved us (past tense), but that he continues to love us. He wants us to be friends!

But if we are to make the most of his friendship, then we need to develop our relationship with him.

Just as a marriage relationship needs to be worked at, so too does our relationship with Jesus need to be worked on.

Just as, for instance, husbands and wives need to ensure that they have time for one another, so too we need to ensure that we have time for Jesus.

It is in that context that I want to approach my text for this morning.

In the very same chapter in which Jesus speaks of his followers as friends, Jesus speaks of himself as “**the true vine**” and his disciples as “**branches**”.

He says in John 15.4: “**Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me**”.

2. LET’S DEVELOP OUR FRIENDSHIP WITH JESUS

“**Remain united to me and I will remain united to you**” (15.4).

Peterson in his NT paraphrase has Jesus say: “*Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you*”,

Or in the more familiar words of the NRSV: “*Abide in me as I abide in you*”.

Notice that Jesus uses the ‘imperative’ – he gives an order.

This is not just a statement of fact, but a command.

What’s more, he uses the present tense – ‘*keep on abiding in me; remain united to me*’.

The impression is sometimes given that once we are grafted onto the vine, then there is nothing to do save to “**remain united to**” Jesus.

In the words of one commentator: remaining united to Jesus “*should contain no strain or effort; it is rest from effort. The natural branch should not strain to remain a part of the vine; it simply is. All it need do is to stay connected*” (CT Evans).

But the reverse is the case: it does take effort to remain united to Jesus. If we are to “**remain united**” to Jesus, then we need to work at our relationship with Jesus.

Let me quote to you one commentator: “*Disciples... must make an effort to ‘remain’. Remaining is not simply believing in Jesus, though that is crucial, but includes being in union with him, sharing his thoughts, emotions, intentions, and power. In a relationship both parties must be engaged. The divine must take the initiative and provide the means and the ability for union to take place, but it cannot happen without the response of the disciple*” (Rodney Whitacre).

In our vision for the church we have said: “*We want to be a strong and vibrant town-centre church where every member is passionate to grow in the faith*”.

If we are to grow in the faith, then we must remain united to Jesus – we must abide in him – we must develop our friendship with Jesus – we must work at our relationship with Jesus.

This leads me to my third point.

3. LET'S MAKE TIME TO BE FRIENDS WITH JESUS

“**Remain united to me**”, says Jesus.

This remaining involves a 24/7 relationship – it is a whole time relationship.

It is not a Sundays only thing – but a Sunday to Sunday and every hour in-between thing. But within the context of that 24/7 relationship there must be occasions when we consciously make time to develop our friendship of Jesus.

In evangelical circles we traditionally call such occasions ‘*Quiet Times*’.

I believe that it is not enough to make time for Jesus once a week on a Sunday – we need to make time for Jesus throughout the week. We need to develop a daily ‘QT’.

This is what Jesus did. He had a daily ‘Quiet Time’. He made time to speak to his Father. We read for instance in Mark 1.35, that after an extraordinarily busy and demanding time of teaching and healing: “**Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of the town to a lonely place where he prayed**”.

What’s more, we know that this was not a one-off retreat, but part of a pattern.

Luke, for instance, tells us that before Jesus chose his 12 apostles, he “**spent the whole night praying to God**” (6.12).

The Gospels constantly tell us of Jesus making time to pray.

If Jesus made time to develop his relationship with his Father, so too should we.

‘**But how much time?**’ some might ask.

Most of us live very busy lives. ‘How much time should we make for Jesus?’

I find that a difficult question to answer.

We don’t normally measure a relationship in terms of time.

In our church strategy document, however, we suggest that each church member should seek to set aside “*at least 10 minutes a day for Jesus*”.

As one of my deacons wrote in a recent e-mail to me: “*As there are 1440 minutes a day this is not too much to ask most members*”.

What is the best time in the day to devote 10 or more minutes to Jesus?

In one sense that is down to each individual.

We all function differently: some people are larks, and some are owls.

For me, first thing in the morning works best.

In Isaiah 50.4 the unknown Servant of the Lord declares: “**Every morning he makes me eager to hear what he is going to teach me**”. That too is my experience.

If I were to wait until the evening for my Quiet Time, I would be falling asleep.

I think there is a lot to be said in setting the alarm 15 minutes’ early to spend time with Jesus.

But ultimately it is down to you to choose the time – the important thing is that you develop a time when day by day you can set aside 10 minutes or more for Jesus.

What do we do in those 10 or so minutes? On the basis of the vine-branch metaphor, I want to suggest we do four things

1. *In the first place, we draw fresh energy from Jesus.* “Whoever does not remain in me... dries up” (v6). It is as we remain in Jesus, that we the branches draw fresh sap from the vine itself, so that in turn we are able to bear fruit.

Not to remain in Jesus – not to make time for Jesus on a regular basis – is to deprive ourselves of the life-giving energy of Jesus & become barren.

Alas, time and again we act as though we were supermen & superwomen, as though we in ourselves had the individual strength for all the demands and challenges of life. But the fact is that without maintaining our relationship with Jesus on a daily basis, we haven’t got the strength.

The Quaker John Edward Southall wrote: “We cannot come through life strong and fresh on constant express trains, but we must have places of gthe Most High, times of waiting upon the Lord”

2. Secondly *we listen to Jesus.* “**Remain in me and (let) my words remain in you**” (v7). I.e. to remain in Christ is to allow his word to penetrate our hearts and minds. This means that we need to discipline ourselves to read God’s word, meditate on it, and listen to what is being said to us

My experience is that if we are to do this, then we need a system of reading God’s Word.

- For some people this might mean going onto the net and down-loading the passage for the day
- For other people this might mean using Bible reading notes.
- For yet others, it might mean using one of the many simple commentaries produced by Tom Wright in his series ‘The NT for everyone’.

Yes, we need a system for reading our Bibles – but there’s more to it than that. We need to hear what God wants to say to us. We need to allow God’s word to remain in us. When we read our Bibles, we need to read them with a sense of expectancy that Jesus has something to say to us.

- In this respect, I find it helpful to mark my Bible – to underline a particular word or verse.
- Other people will actually write down into a journal what they believe God is saying to them.

The important point is that we don’t read for the sake of reading, we read for the sake of listening

3. *Thirdly we discover Jesus’ priorities for the day – or, if it is the evening, then what are his priorities for the day that lies ahead tomorrow?*

As we listen to Jesus we need to open not just our Bibles, but also our diaries. For Jesus does not just want to speak warm & soothing words to us – he also wants to speak words of direction & of command. Look at 15.10: “**If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love**”.

In that particular context, Jesus’ command is particularly associated with his command to love one another. However, the point I want to extrapolate is this: that abiding in Jesus involves obeying Jesus.

For this to happen we need to discover his priorities for our lives.

So in our quiet time we need to ask ourselves: ‘What does Jesus want me to do in the day that lies ahead?’ Is there a person he wants me to speak to? Is there a decision he wants me to take? Is there an action he wants me to do? For most of us, the day ahead is not a blank – we have commitments, we have work to do. But within the context of our work, what does he want us to do? Jesus wants us to be activists – but activists whose activity is rooted in him and in his will for our lives. A Scottish preacher once said: *“Herodotus claimed that the bitterest sorrow is to aspire to do much and achieve nothing. No: the bitterest sorrow is to aspire to do much and to do it – and then to discover that it was not worth doing”* (James Simpson).

4. Fourthly, *we pray to Jesus*. **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you will have it”** (v7). Prayer is more than asking. Indeed, I would argue that as we read a passage from the Scripture, and then reflect on what God is saying to us, we are praying; as we open our diaries and ask ourselves what God would have us do in the day that lies ahead, we praying. For listening to God is praying.

But prayer is also about asking. The fact is that as we spend time with Jesus our friend, we will also want to ask our friend’s blessing upon ourselves and others. Listen again to Jesus: **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you will have it”**. Do notice that the asking is consequent upon our spending time with Jesus. It is arising from our relationship with Jesus, that we will make our requests. In turn this means that we will not ask for any old thing – we will not ask for 50 ice-creams as apparently I once did as a child. **“Anything you wish”** does not mean that Jesus is encouraging us to ask for a Rolls Royce or a yacht or whatever; **“anything you will ask”** is directly linked with how God wants us to live our lives. Jesus bless me as I seek to live for you and serve you.

And, of course, because we are friends of Jesus, we will also want to ask his blessing on others. I have a weekly prayer diary with a list of people for whom to pray: one section is entitled ‘Yesterday’ – and I bring before God people whom I met yesterday and who need to know his blessing upon their lives’; I have another section marked ‘Today’ – I think of people I am due to meet today, and ask his blessing upon them.

Yes, let’s make time for Jesus – to draw strength from him, to listen to him, to discover his priorities, and to ask his blessing upon ourselves and upon others. This is what it means to “remain in the vine”, to “abide in Jesus”.

And please note, that making time for Jesus need not be desperately time-consuming. But it does involve time. Indeed, I wish to suggest that at the very least it involves 10 minutes a day. But then, friendship always involves time.

Jesus wants us to be friends with him.

So let’s be friends with him

Let’s develop our friendship with him/ Let’s make time for our friendship with him