

SERMON – 30/8/26

Romans 12:9-21

"Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves." (Romans 12:10)

Last week we began to look at the practical teaching in the closing section of Paul's Letter to the Romans, headed as it is by the over-arching call "not to conform any longer to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Last Sunday we thought a little bit about belonging together as members of the Body of Christ each with our own particular contribution to make according to the gifts we have each been given.

This morning I want to take that thought a little bit further by exploring what we are taught to be distinctively as Christians in the way that we relate to each other within the fellowship of the Church as a witness to the world around us of the ways of God's Kingdom. We are called to leave behind the fractious, divisive, self-seeking ways of the world and to show what things can be like when Jesus is enthroned as King. In the building of friendships with other Christian believers we are called to exceed even the very best of human friendship and to imitate Christ Himself. Of course all of us often mess up and get it wrong but that's no reason to give up trying.

In our reading this morning Paul gives us some practical (albeit pretty challenging) teaching about what it means to be a Christian in our relationships with others and what I would like to do in the time we have today is to focus on how our friendships within the church can and should be different from other friendships we may have because of the impact of the common bond we share in Christ.

By way of a particular example I would like to look with you at the friendship between David the shepherd boy who would one day be Israel's greatest king and Jonathan the son and heir of King Saul, because it displays many of the characteristics that are emphasised here by the apostle in Romans.

King Saul is on the throne of Israel but he has not lived up to God's expectations of him (don't let's judge him because, as I say, you and I are not very different). The Lord has determined that Saul will ultimately be replaced by David, who has come into the royal court after winning his famous victory over the Philistine giant, Goliath, and who has found his niche playing music on his harp and bringing comfort to the king when he is disturbed. Despite the good that David did to Saul, the king was insanely jealous of the shepherd boy and actually tried to kill him on several occasions. But David stuck it out, honouring Saul as the Lord's anointed, and in the process striking up a very deep friendship with the crown prince, Jonathan. The story of the friendship of David and Jonathan is wonderful to read – you can find it in 1 Samuel 20 – and I commend it to you. It is a great example of what friendship can and ought to be among the people of God.

First of all, Christian friendship should be founded on love. "Love must be sincere, writes Paul. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." (vv.9-10) There are a number of words for love in the New Testament and we meet two of them side by side here in Romans 12, both of them essential ingredients of friendship between Christian believers. Supremely there is *agape* – the love which God has shown to us in Jesus Christ and which Christ has expressed to us most fully by laying down His life for us. That kind of love must be among us in the church and it must be sincere, self-emptying love, sacrificial. But Paul emphasises that our love for one another as Christians must not just be plastered on for show or talked about in idealistic terms, it must be lived out. That's why he also uses the word *philadelphia* – brotherly love, expressed not just in worship or in spiritual talk but in the nitty-gritty of life. It's one thing to stand and sing together in church on a Sunday but it's quite another to walk together with your Christian sister or brother in the ups and downs of everyday life, expressing practical love through thick and thin.

That's the example that David and Jonathan give us. We are told that the two men loved each other as they loved themselves – in other words they were as concerned for each other's wellbeing as they were for their own. They were in a situation where their

friendship could well have led them into danger – in the context of a royal court where politics were behind almost every word, and particularly in the context of this particular royal court, where the king was so mentally and emotionally unstable that he was prone to fling spears at people during mealtimes. It would have been very easy when things became difficult for either David or Jonathan to switch sides and betray the other in order to save their own skin. But their love was a godly love – it was sincere and the brotherly bonds that held them were too important to be easily cast aside. I wonder if that describes the friendships we each have within the family of faith? Others should be able to see a reflection of the love of God and the sacrificial love of Jesus in the way that we relate to each other, lived out in the everyday reality of the brotherly or sisterly affection of the children of our heavenly Father that goes beyond the social niceties of human friendship, far beyond even personal gain or safety. So Christian friendship is founded on love.

Secondly, Christian friendship must be founded on genuine sharing. Paul writes here: "Share with God's people who are in need. Practise hospitality." (v.13) Going back to the example of David and Jonathan, we find their brotherly bonds of friendship working themselves out in very practical ways. When David's life was in danger, Jonathan risked his own life to protect him, providing him with warnings and a means of escape when the King was threatening to have him killed. Jonathan shared his very self with David in his hour of need. And when we read the history of the early church in the Book of Acts, we see very much the same kind of thing in action as a matter of course and not just in isolated, individual cases. Listen to this from Acts 4: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them. There were no needy persons among them." (Acts 4:32-34)

In a structural way, I'm glad to say the Church exhibits that kind of sharing. Churches like our own which are relatively strong and financially stable (although don't let's ever be complacent about

that) we contribute to the wider work of the church to support Christian ministry and mission in remote areas, in areas of poverty and in communities where there would otherwise be no Christian witness at all both overseas and in our own country. That is part of our sharing as a congregation of the Church of Scotland. But apart from that every quarter when we gather at the Lord's Table to celebrate God's grace and goodness to us we as a congregation also organise a special collection to support good causes locally, nationally and internationally. That is not an icing-on-the-cake sort of add-on to our life as a church but is actually of the very essence of our being as the people of God, and it must go beyond finances and involve us in the giving of our time in exercising the gifts we have each been given for the common good, whether in the corporate activities of the congregation or in one-to-one acts of service as individuals. I wonder if we are ready to get involved in that kind of sharing with our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need of various kinds? Don't let's underestimate the cost of truly sharing our lives in friendship with others in the Christian community, but equally don't ever discount its value. Christian friendship is about sharing.

So, finally, let's consider one more expression of Christian friendship that Paul gives us in this morning's reading. "As far as it depends on you, he writes, live at peace with everyone and do not take revenge, my friends." (v.18-19)

The story of the friendship of David and Jonathan is a very moving one. Each had much to lose from such a friendship but, as they discovered, the deeper gains far outweighed whatever they might have lost. Jonathan was heir to the throne and yet he did not consider himself too proud to associate with the shepherd boy his father had employed to play the harp for him. Even when David became a contender for the throne and Jonathan stood to lose his birthright it made no difference to their relationship. For his part, David could easily have dismissed Jonathan – like father, like son, he might have thought – and he could have held a grudge against Saul's family because of all the suffering and heartache he endured at the king's hand over many years. But quite the contrary, when Saul and Jonathan were both killed in

battle and David was established on the throne, David looked for ways in which he could do good to Saul's family on account of his friendship with Jonathan. "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" he asks. (2 Samuel 9:1) They bring forth Mephibosheth, Jonathan's disabled son, and David restores to him the lands his grandfather Saul had once held. "Do not repay evil for evil," writes Paul.

How much we have to learn about being the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus humbled Himself completely for our sake and gave Himself up for us. We need to learn from Him and from His Word about humbling ourselves for others, about going the extra mile and eschewing bitterness and revenge. We need to recognise the potential that Christian friendship has to witness to the transforming love of God. Let our relationships with others in the fellowship of this church and with Christians elsewhere display sincere love. Let us be prepared to share with one another, giving *and* receiving as each of us has need. And let us live out the peace of God and show forth the power of forgiveness and grace that all around us may know what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus and may enter into friendship with Him themselves as a result.