

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse - Sunday October 28th 2007 Proverbs 27:1-22 on friendship

Ian began by reflecting that in 2004 the last episode of the TV series 'Friends' was shown to an audience in the UK of 9.6 million viewers, the most watched programme on Channel 4 that year. Why was it so popular? Because everyone needs friends!

Christianity may not be a good place to start to look at friendship, because Christians are called to love everyone unconditionally, we are supposed to love even our enemies. Friendship on the other hand is particular and to some degree exclusive. This call to love can be difficult and cause us pain.

But there is something on friendship both in the Old and New Testaments. Here in Proverbs 27 we have a manual on friendship. But not everyone knows how to be a friend. They are too full of themselves, never asking about you, or they are grumpy old fools always letting off steam – which can be exhausting! If jealousy enters into a relationship, the possibility of real friendships, as opposed to manipulative, controlling friendships is non-existent. In fact David had to flee King Saul when the latter became jealous. So avoid certain people – big-heads, hot-heads and also 'air-heads', i.e. people who are shallow, and who prefer flattery instead of being open and honest in their relationships. These people will not risk the friendship in order to tell you some home truths about yourself, usually because they are snobs and trying to climb the social ladder.

Speaking the truth in love does not mean you go around picking out everyone's faults, but it means having the courage not to shrink back when it is time to speak honestly; to love someone to the point that they will be honest with them, rather like a father will discipline a child because he loves that child.

A successful life according to Waldo Emerson is not thousands at your funeral, but six good friends who know you with all your faults, and have stuck with you, who lament your passing away. Always suspect the person who has lots of friends, because real friends will only prove that they are so when there is adversity.

Here at GBC we have a choice to be a place of superficial friendships, of social niceties, or to go beyond that to include deep friendships. Not with everyone, of course, as that would be unreal – and there is a place for small talk in what we do after the service on Sunday. But somewhere in the life of the Church we need to find real friends. If we don't then we're in real trouble. Friends can listen. For some problems we have to go to the psychotherapist, but friends can handle less extreme problems because they are closer to the helpee, more available, and are less formal, and better still, they listen. By looking into the eyes of a friend (v 19) who loves you enough not to flatter but to offer you both compliments as well as hard truths, you really get to see who we are. After all verse 21 says you are what your friends say about you.

As we come to communion we see that the Lord himself had friends, 12 and then the three special friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. All friendship carries the risk of betrayal and Jesus was betrayed by a friend, Judas, - with a kiss. But the mystery of God is such that the execution of Jesus, set in motion by a kiss, was actually the means of bringing us into friendship with God. His life for our life, that we might be reconciled to God. As he said to his disciples in the Upper Room, 'Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.' John 15:15