

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 6th May 2018

John 15: 9 - 17

Creator is commonly used, as is Father. Holy - of course - is probably the most often used. At Easter I use Living a lot, and Gracious is used typically in prayers of intercession. Other names that we use for God, which are all found in the Bible, include Lord, Refuge, Rock, King, Shepherd, Light, Judge, Fortress, Deliverer.

Typically, there are 1,700 words in my sermons. If I were to list all the names of God found in the Bible along with all the adjectives and adverbs used to describe God's actions and attributes. And, if I were to add to those the biblical names or titles we use to describe the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, and then all the names by which the Bible addresses the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, then I think that would be my sermon and more.

In the Bible God is known by many names. In your life, what is the name of God? Is God your Father, your Judge, your Shepherd, your Creator, your Fortress, your Lord, your Light? Is it necessary to choose just one name, or are there different names that we use at times in our lives: Father if we feel alone; Shepherd when we feel afraid; Judge when we know we have done wrong; Light when we are looking for a way out? What is the name of God in your life?

Today, the name of God in our life together as a church during this Eastertide season - the season when we celebrate the resurrection by rejoicing that Jesus is alive in the world - today the biblical name of God for us as a church together is found in this morning's Gospel reading, Friend. Jesus said,

You are my friends... I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father.¹

In the Gospel of John this morning Jesus not only describes what our relationship to himself and to God is like, he also describes what our relationship to God and himself is *not* like,

You are my friends, if you do what I command you; I call you servants no longer; a servant does not know what his master is about...²

The word 'servants' is not an inaccurate translation of the word Jesus actually used, but a better one would be slave, 'I call you slaves no longer...'

That Jesus should in one breathe set his disciples free from slavery to God, 'I call you slaves no longer...,' and then in the next breath treat his disciples like they are still slaves, that is people under his command, 'You are my friends, if you do what I command you...,' seems like a contradiction; you can't command someone to be your friend.

¹ John 15: 14 - 15

² John 15: 15

But, this contradiction, whereby someone sets someone else free while simultaneously commanding them into a new relationship, put me in mind of someone else who did the same thing, Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States who set slaves free. He did that by legal means, and by an amendment to the United States Constitution that outlawed slavery. In effect he commanded slaves to be freed, to be no longer slaves, and he even went as far as fighting a war in order to enforce a new relationship in the United States between white people and people of colour.

In her magisterial biography of Abraham Lincoln, Doris Goodwin describes the way that Abraham Lincoln finally came to the realisation that the United States Constitution needed amending in order to command and enshrine in law forever a new relationship between two groups of peoples who had been separated by slavery; a relationship that Lincoln hoped would become one of friends.

Abraham Lincoln's realisation of the necessity of enforcing friendship and outlawing slavery came from reading the 4th century BC Greek mathematician Euclid's thoughts on geometry. Euclid declared a particular geometric principle to be 'self-evident', a phrase that lies at the heart of the United States Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Using the term 'self evident' Euclid argued that it is self-evident that two things that are equal to the same third thing, must by mathematical law be equal to each other. The geometry takes a little bit of thought and experimentation, but it holds true. If two things are equal to a third thing, they are equal to each other.

Lincoln borrowed this geometric principle and applied it to politics, and came to the conclusion about what should be a self-evident constitutional truth. If it is self evident that people are equal, as the Declaration of Independence said, then those people, equal to each other, must also be equal under the law by which they are governed. Or to restate that in relation to God, if all people are created equal in the eyes of God, then they must be equal in the eyes of each other.

The Gospel of John recounts Jesus setting free his disciples, us, from a relationship of enslavement to God, and defining the new relationship that we have with God as one of friendship. But, importantly, Jesus goes further; he completes the geometry. If we are each called to be a friend of God, if friend is the name by which we call God, then it is a self-evident truth that we should also call each other friends. If friend is the name by which now we know God, then friend must be the name by which now we seek to know one another.

That is why Jesus goes further than just commanding his followers' freedom and commanding them in to a relationship of friendship with him. He also commands them to be friends with one another. If you feel that God loves you, then you must love your neighbour; it is self-evidently so, it is mathematically so, it breaks the laws of the universe to do otherwise. As we read from the first letter of John,

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and to love the parent means to love his child...³

For Abraham Lincoln America only existed, lived, when people had an equal place under the Constitution and consequently treated each other equally. For those who are disciples of Jesus Christ, who wish to live in the Kingdom of God, who wish to live in a post-Easter world, Jesus Christ is alive in this world when we who are friends of God treat each other as friends; when we who believe that we are loved by God, love each other. Friendship is the way we love each other; friendship is the way Jesus lives; friendship should be a distinctive mark of the church.

When we who are followers of Jesus seek friendship with one another, and seek friendship with the world around us then Christ lives, and we create between us and around us a spirit of holiness, a Holy Spirit. Friends sometimes have to honest with each other, they sometimes have to work at their relationship, forgive each other, confess to each other, even occasionally judge each other, but Christ is alive and the Holy Spirit is present when we who are in a loving friendship with God are in a loving friendship with each other.

That sounds so obvious that it is hardly worth preaching. If we don't seek to be friends with one another, how can we live together as children of God? Well, it is obvious; it is self-evident. Yet, unfortunately, this self-evident truth is not always self-evident everywhere.

If a community or a church or a country sets out to create within it not a spirit of holiness - a Holy Spirit - but a spirit of hostility, a hostile environment, then it is difficult to see how friendship can be fostered. Indeed, the spirit of holiness that is there in relationships of equality and friendship and love is so self-evident, so geometrically aligned, that if you seek to foster a spirit of hostility, a hostile environment, then are you not breaking the laws of nature?

I think you are, because when you do so then love and equality are the losers. When that happens, when we foster a spirit of hostility, a hostile environment, how can we call each other friends? Are those migrants who arrived here by boat on the Empire Windrush not our friends? They are certainly our equals, both legally and in the eyes of God.⁴

A church or a community or a country exists, lives, is alive, only because of the relationships that exist and between those who live in that church or community or country. If in that church or that community or that country a spirit of hostility is fostered then equality is undermined and friends are no longer friends and any hope of holiness is lost.

³ 1 John 5: 1

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21741548-new-home-secretary-right-man-job-what-job-sajid-javid-gets-work>

Christ lives today, when we who believe that we are loved by God, who call God our friend love each other and call each other friends; that is holy. That is the Kingdom of God; the foundation of the universe, in spirit. But, when amongst us in this country a different, more unequal and less loving spirit is fostered then relationships are destroyed, friends are lost, and the country's spiritual and universal foundation is undermined.