

Lent 1 – Friendship in God, the God who gives us life.

One of God's closest friends, St Peter, is called to God's throne. "I need a holiday," God says. "I have been working flat out for far too long. I will leave you in charge, Peter. And I also want you to source me an appropriate location. Somewhere where I can get away from it all. Somewhere where I can find a little peace and quiet too."

So after a couple of days St Peter returns. "I've got just the place for you, boss", he says. "It is beautifully quiet. Just the place to get away from all the stress".

"Where is it?" asks God. "The moon", St Peter tells him.

"I can't go to the moon", God says, "It is far too dark and dusty".

So St Peter continues his search and returns a couple of days later. "I've got it!", St Peter proclaims. "You will really love this place. It has beautiful beaches, blue seas, forests, tranquil waterways, and should you need to let your hair down, the party scene is pretty good too".

"Where is it?", God asks.

"Earth", St Peter replies.

"I can't go to earth, Peter", God informs him. "I went there 2000 years ago. Whilst there I met a lovely Jewish girl and they are still talking about it!"

Well of course we are still talking about it. And we are still talking about it because through the account of those events we see a level of intimacy and friendship that transforms our understanding of who we are and what we are meant to be.

Have you ever suffered from a broken heart? I have. I remember splitting from my first girlfriend when I was a young teen. We fell out over something quite silly, but the fall-out broke my heart. Of course, as a young teen, I wasn't going to show my

feelings to anyone else, but I have a feeling that those closest to me knew only too well, as for the weeks following, I was probably a bit of a so-and-so.

For many of us, our first recollection of a broken heart would have been an adolescent relationship which ended with sadness. Learning how to work at relationships is an art that we have to begin before we reach maturity and it can be a painful process. All of us have to work at relationships, reflecting on what goes well and what goes wrong so that we may continue to improve the relationships we have. Sometimes, even as adults, relationships break down, and often over a point of principle or something which, to the outside world at least, seems rather trivial. But that does not mean that the fallout feels any less painful – it breaks our heart.

At the core of our being is God. The self-giving God who gives in order to bring about creation. Somewhere deep inside, we have a godlikeness implanted in us. In Genesis we are told that we are made in God's image. He breathes life into us, and the life that he breathes into us, is the very life of God himself. This godlikeness at the core of our being is often referred to as our heart. When we hear in Psalm 51 the psalmist pleading with God to make within him a heart that is pure, he is referring to that core in our personality that is made in the image of God. God, then, is our heart. When God's life stops beating within us, we die. God gives so that we might receive. The summit of that gift, is life itself.

Our task in life, then, is to come to know God more in order that we might live more fully. As we come to know this God better, so we become aware of our need to know him even more.

In our human relationships, we get back what we give. The more we put in, the richer the bond becomes. Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for a friend, to

walk with them in their hardship, momentarily leaving aside all other concerns, sometimes even family, in order that they may have just a small amount of time as we offer them our shoulder and help them in their need. Through such sacrifices the bonds become deeper. When we take time to spend in a friend's presence, so we come to know them better. Our relationship with God is no different. God is the friend who makes us feel alive. Without him, we grieve and our hearts die, bit by bit.

The notion of us making sacrifices in our lives in order to attend to God is often misinterpreted in our society. We are fed the lie that sacrifice is an oppressive notion, and cynics would have us believe that a loving God would not require this of us. Yet we know from our experience that all relationships require a certain amount of sacrifice. Making such sacrifices helps us feel closer to the other person. Sometimes, we need to make the sacrifice of setting all other things aside in order to attend to the relationship.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is doing precisely that. Having been baptised and receiving the blessing of the Holy Spirit, as we do at our confirmations, Jesus retreats into the wilderness to spend time alone in God's presence. He dedicates 40 days to fasting, knowing that he is giving up the things he loves as a small sacrifice, in order to strengthen his relationship with the Father and move deeper into the life of God's life-giving Spirit. As he moves towards the end of his fast, so the temptations of the world begin crashing in on him. The devil tempts him with three rather attractive notions, but Jesus knows that each is a lure to drag him away from the life of God, towards death. Like Adam, when he eats the forbidden fruit, it would be so simple for Jesus to take the easy option, but unlike Adam, Christ resists the temptation. That which would have caused an unimaginable breakdown

in his friendship with the Father, is resisted. And so the story of the ministry of God's Son is cemented from its beginning in faithfulness and truth. Every aspect of his life, death and resurrection is only made possible because of his resilience and perseverance at the time of trial. The sacrifices he makes in the wilderness strengthens the relationship within God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From that platform, God's miraculous actions through his Son can commence.

How easy it would have been for him to let the world get in the way. How easy it is for us too. Our busyness, our relationships, the woes of the world around us, can all be temptations. Even the closest human friendship can develop unhelpful traits that distance us from the God who gives us life. So many things can encourage us to neglect the time we need to spend in securing our relationship with God. So many things can make us believe the cynical lie that the sacrifices are not necessary.

But our God, is a god of endless mercy, who loves us with an infinite love. He does not give up on us, for he does not want us to die of our broken heart. So he touches the wound. It is sore and it can be painful, but he is the Lord who heals all our infirmities. So he nudges, and reaches out to draw us back to himself. He calls us to his holy house, to meditate on him. He gives us bread and the wine at his holy Altar and transforms it into the Body and Blood of his Son, so that the eternal life that flows in Christ may flow in us too. Through these heavenly gifts we connect the godliness at our core with the God who put it there and his life grows within us. Only if we push him away will the wound in our heart fester and grow.

When Jesus goes into the wilderness to spend time in God's presence, he does so to retreat away from the distraction that would stop his meditation on God, his Father. He looks to spend some time away from the things that would stop him searching within himself to find the God within.

In Jesus, we see the result of nurturing that godly core. The life God breathes into us does not end in our death so long as we stay in touch with its source. Later in this season, as we walk through Holy Week, into the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we will see the world doing its worst to try and maintain the lie that God's life can be brought to an end by the betrayal, violence, and death imposed upon Jesus. The world will just as likely try the same deception with each of us, sooner or later.

But as we enter Easter Day, we know it cannot not succeed. The breath of God cannot be taken from us, even at death, so long as we attend to it. So long as we work at keeping the friendship strong, our hearts will not be broken.

So this Lent, I would like to encourage you to take the opportunity to spend time nurturing your friendship with the God who gives you life.

Amen

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