

Homily: Sixth Sunday of Easter 2021

So tomorrow, God willing and Boris permitting, we should get confirmation that Step 3 of the government's road map for unlocking the country will go ahead. It will be great news for many businesses, and also give us a simple freedom we haven't enjoyed for many months – to meet indoors with our loved ones. Like many people, the thing I've found hardest in the last 15 months is the lack of opportunity to spend time with my family and my friends. God willing, it's about to get easier.

Spending time with friends is a great gift, because friendship itself is a great blessing in our lives. It is a form of love, of course, and a very important one. C. S. Lewis, in his work *The Four Loves*, makes the point that some types of love are necessary for our survival: romantic love which brings new life into the world, and the affection which parents instinctively feel for their children. Without these, the human race could not survive. But friendship is different. It's not biologically necessary; it goes beyond what nature demands of us. In that sense, it's super-natural – beyond nature. Every real friendship has something divine about it.

More or less all lasting relationships, including marriage, are built on friendship. And this is true also of our relationship with the Lord. "I call you friends", Jesus says to us today. We should remember these words: we are called into friendship with the Son of God. He calls us His friends. And He points to two aspects of every genuine friendship: self-revelation, and self-giving.

Let's start with self-giving. "A man can have no greater love than to lay down His life for His friends", Jesus tells us, just a few hours before He goes to the cross for our salvation. To be a friend is to make sacrifices, to give of ourselves for the other. Jesus' gift is complete, His friendship is perfect: it is a total gift of self, a gift beyond our understanding. That same love He receives from the Father, He shares with us, and He shows us this love by dying for us. And then He commands us: do the same! "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you... Love one another, as I have loved you". In today's second reading St John tells us very clearly: "God is love." Jesus is teaching us: the love that is at the heart of God is the love I share with you; now, share that love with one another. He has given His all, and He teaches us to give of ourselves as fully as we can. In this way we return His friendship.

Friendship is also self-revelation. Genuine friends really know each other. They trust each other enough to be themselves. When I was a child, I enjoyed spending time with my friends and we shared similar interests. In my adult life, that's still true, but something more is needed: my friends are those who really know me. They understand what makes me tick, what inspires me, what worries or troubles me, what makes me who I am. They know about my struggles and my joys. And I know theirs. To form a friendship, you have to be willing to reveal yourself to the other, and to let them do the same. "I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business. I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father." "I have made known *everything*", Jesus tells us. He has revealed Himself to us, completely –

now we can truly know Him. For our part, we must learn to reveal ourselves to Jesus: to spend time in prayer simply telling Him about our joys, our sorrows, our struggles, our successes and failures. This is what friendship is.

Revealing ourselves to another does carry risks. We may fear rejection. The other person may challenge us to change. A part of friendship is being willing to say things which no one else can say, but this is always done with love for the other. Jesus is a friend who is willing to say difficult things to us, to call us to conversion and growth; He shines a light on those areas of our lives where we are less than perfect, and teaches us to love. A good friend would never do anything less.

During His earthly life, Jesus formed friendships with those around Him: the twelve Apostles, the holy women, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. He even came in for criticism over His friendships – His opponents accused Him of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” Jesus remains a friend of sinners today; He is our friend. To be in friendship with the Lord means having the confidence to come before Him, just as we are and to reveal ourselves to Him. It means giving ourselves to Him in love. And it also means knowing that, even as He calls us to conversion, we are both accepted and loved. He calls us friends.

Fr Andrew

