

King's College London Chapel



A sermon on the theme of God as Friend,
by the Revd Dr Jenny Morgans
in the College Chapel on the Strand,
on Wednesday 5th October 2022¹

May I speak in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Friend to All. Amen.

Intro: how do you see God/think of God/pray to God/talk about God?

Friendship is as old as human beings are, it runs deep in our history and in our blood. Friendship is something that can come easily and naturally - we are, after all, always seeking true relationship with our fellow creatures. Yet it is also something that easily goes wrong, and we can be as good at making enemies as we are at friends. This works on an individual level. We all have people who we don't like, even though we don't really know why! Some of you who were around last year might remember me preaching about how making true friends can really help London shift from being a place where you just study and exist, to somewhere you can feel at home. Friends become our chosen family, our rock, the ones we turn to first when we are in need or when we have something to celebrate.

But such friendship also works on a cultural, international level. Why has Putin *unfriended* Ukraine to such devastating effects?? In fact, we could say that recent history has been built on hierarchical and polarised relationships, rather than friendship. *But* we are not alone, and cannot exist alone or be saved alone. Individualism is a fallacy, and we see relationship as the central motif, and all

¹ Much of this sermon is inspired by, or borrowed from, Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

contemporary liberationist movements insist that solidarity is the key to freedom: from Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to liberation theology and any attempts to redress the climate chaos. The close proximity of warfare, the destruction of our natural environment, and the unequal distribution of food to support the world's increasing population lend irrefutable credence to this reality. Friendship expresses that ideal of relationship among people of all ages, genders, races, and it is needed across difference. It can be done: look at the welcoming of 50,000 Ukrainians into the UK alone.

But *why* am I even talking about friendship? Because the metaphor of friendship is ideally suited to express certain dimensions of a mature relationship with God.

However you think about God, however you pray to God or imagine God, it says something about God and hierarchy, and power, and proximity.

The God of Jesus invites us to the table to eat together as friends. Friendship with God emphasises not the God above but rather alongside, a horizontal rather than a vertical relationship. The most appropriate image for such a horizontal relationship is God as companion, one who travels with us and shares our experience. Jurgen Moltmann argues that such a relationship is friendship with God: the friend of God does not live any longer under God, but with and in God. Such a person shares in the grief and the joy of God, such a person has become one with God.² *In contrast to some other images of God, in companionship there are elements of both dependence and independence, our view of power is reshaped, as is our view of service and care.* Such a God is a companion whom we wish to please and who attracts our cooperation, rather than commanding as obedient children or servants.

If one of the most meaningful understandings of salvation is the suffering of God *for and with* the pain and oppression of the world, then the model of God as friend takes on special significance. Jesus, in his identification with the suffering of others throughout his life and especially at his death, is a parable of God's friendship with us at the most profound level. We see this identification in parables such as the lost sheep , the prodigal son, and the Great Supper where the outcasts are welcomed and the righteous turned aside. We see it also in the Beatitudes and in Jesus's reading from Isaiah: proclaiming good news to the poor, released to the captives and liberty for the oppressed. But we see it even more dramatically in Jesus's table-fellowship with sinners and tax

² Jurgen Moltmann, 'The Motherly Father: Is Trinitarian Patripassionism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?', in *God as Father?*, by Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), pp. 51–56.

collectors. This fellowship shocked his enemies and impressed his followers because eating with others was the closest form of intimacy at the time. You just didn't eat with the ritually unclean, with gentiles, with those in despised trades; hence, for Jesus to eat with such people, to be called the *friend* of such people, was a form of radical acceptance and friendship. Some New Testament scholars argue that such a practise alone was sufficient cause for his being put to death on a cross, for it shattered attempts to close ranks against the Roman enemy by keeping the Jewish community pure.

Who are our friends? The classical Greek understanding of friendship demands that it can occur only between equals, but the mode of Jesus's friendship with others does not suggest that equality is its main characteristic: rather, identification with the needs and sufferings of others regardless of difference seems far more critical. Well, Jesus was asked a question not dissimilar to this: who are our neighbours? And he answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan: a radical story despite its over-familiarity to many of us.

If Jesus is the friend who identifies with the sufferings of the oppressed in his table-fellowship against all expectations and conventions, so also is he the one who, as we heard in John's gospel, lays down his life for his friends. Friends shoulder one another's burdens, if need be to the point of death. His way of expressing his love for his friends also must be our way of expressing gratitude for such love: we too must lay down our lives. Thus we are no longer called servants but friends, doing for others what our friend did for us.

How we speak of God is important. The language, images and metaphors we use for God influence not only our prayer life and theology, but also impacts how we see one another, how we act in the world as Christians, and the kind of God that we believe in and communicate to those we meet.

Since we live within our images unconsciously, the way we model our relationship with God has significant impact on our understanding of human existence. If our idea of God's saving activity contributes to a view of human life as infantile, individualistic, or isolated (as some images of God do) then it is deeply in need of substantial revision, for human life cannot responsibly be seen in those terms. Any notion of salvation which presumes that individuals need to be rescued from the world, that does not take seriously our efforts to participate in the struggle against oppression and for wellbeing, or that allows us to avoid our responsibility by appealing to a God who alone can protect and save, any such notion cannot be a model for adults, and is perhaps even contrary to Christian faith. Such a model is certainly contrary to the image of Jesus as the friend of outcasts and one who

gives his life for his friends. Rather than stressing the protection, comfort, and redemption of individuals apart from others and the world, a friendship model emphasises sacrifice, support, and solidarity with others and the world. God is our friend who suffers with us as we work with God to bring about a better existence for suffering humanity.

But the thought of worshipping or praying to a friend probably seems odd if not inappropriate to most of us. How intimate can one be with God as friend? Can we feel thankful to God as friend? Can one ask God as friend for aid and support? For forgiveness or acceptance? Well, these are things we do in our adult friendships all the time. Perhaps this then requires a rethink of what we mean by worship or prayer? The model of God as friend suggests that the adequate and appropriate worship of God is not a solitary affair between the soul and God but a dance in which all join together accompanied by the music of the spheres. Friendship is an intimation of the unification of all creation, joined together in harmony *and friendship* with God. Friends are deeply thankful to one another for all the gifts that pass between them. They feel free to ask for help when it is needed and take pleasure in supporting each other. Thankfulness and requests for help between friends do not carry the notes of duty or expectation (conventionally found in parent/child relationships for example). A gift from a friend, or an offer of aid, is suggestive of grace.

This autumn, the sermon series at our Wednesday Eucharists, is Speaking of God. You will hear about other images of God: Father and Mother, Artist and Midwife, Mourner and Judge. Each one is not a case of ‘this one is better than that’ or ‘my idea of God is right and yours wrong’. Rather, this term we hope we demonstrate that God is broad and deep and wide, and we limit both God and ourselves when we have only a 2D version of who God is. A technicolour God, including all these images of God and many more, can help us deepen our faith, and communicate it afresh in each generation. So while you are invited to hear about all these different images and metaphors for God this autumn, you are also invited to imagine your own. Who is God to you right now, what kind of God do you need, what do people most need from God in our world at this time, and how can we make that happen?

And to start off, why not try living and praying this as if God is our friend?

Amen.