

# THE MEASURE OF FRIENDSHIP

“Who is this,” the amazed crowds asked as Jesus made his final trip to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and entered into his final Holy Week. From the very first Holy Week up until today, there are no simple answers to this simple question. This is a king with a great following, who claims his kingdom is not of this Earth. This man Jesus speaks with the authority of God, but was from the backwater town of Nazareth. He inspires great devotion from his supporters who last Sunday spread their jackets and palms before Him; but by today, Holy Thursday his friends would betray him and his enemies execute him.

“Who is this,” the crowds asked. An Armenian proverb that I quote a lot might help us shed light on the question of just who Jesus was; “Ըսէ՛ր ով է ընկերդ, ըստ՛ ով ես դու | Tell Me Who Your Friends Are, I’ll Tell You Who You Are.” In other words, you can tell a lot about people by the company they keep, so perhaps we can learn who Jesus is by looking to his friends.

Who are our Lord’s closest friends? They are mostly ignorant fishermen, who throughout the Gospels, don’t understand their leader, and in the events we have recalled tonight in our readings will abandon him, to the very last man. Either this man Jesus is the worst leader that ever lived, or He chooses these humble and disobedient ones to show that no one is great until God makes them great. If you have been humbled as I have by ignorance, by weakness or exhaustion in the trial of this Lenten season plus pandemic, may God’s glory show greater in us for our humility. For Jesus is a friend of the humble.

Who else are Jesus’s friends? The sinners; the unfaithful and the addicted as well as the broken and the prodigals. None of the righteous want much to do with Jesus. Indeed they openly criticized him, saying why are you keeping company with sinners? Jesus response, as often, turns conventional wisdom upside down; “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Mk 2:17).” If you have fallen short as I have-before God and others-in the trials of this Lenten season plus pandemic, may Jesus the physician make us whole, spiritually, mentally and physically. For Jesus is a friend of the sinner.

So, wait a minute then, is the saying wrong; “Tell me who your friends are, I’ll tell you who you are”? What does it say about Jesus—the one without sin, the perfectly obedient Son of God—that he is friends with the sinners, the lost and the broken? It says just about everything. We know much about Christ by the company he keeps, not because he condones our sin, but that knowing how far we fall short, he loves us until the end. Knowing Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denial and Thomas’ disbelief, Jesus still loves them till the end. He still shares everything he has, from his last supper to his last words on the cross.

This is the extraordinary thing about this man Jesus, that he knew more than anyone else the fickle nature of the human heart, and yet he gives his heart to us just the same. For the same crowds shouting “Blessing in the highest,” this past Palm Sunday, would by this point in the week be shouting, “Crucify him.” And all of us know, from even the slightest bit of Lenten self-reflection, that we have a foot in each crowd. For just as soon as we worship God, we turn back to our own forms of self-worship. Just as soon as we love, we hurt and betray; and yet through all this, Jesus knows our struggle and remains our friend.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus said in tonight’s 1st reading, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends, I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:12-16)

And so the story of Jesus’ entry into triumphal entry in to Holy Week this past Sunday, and the stories of betrayal and loss we remember today -are at heart-all stories about friendship. “Tell me who your friends are, I’ll tell you who you are.” Christ’s friendship endures through all disappointments, trials and betrayals of his friends. Our own sins and struggles, whatever they might be, are known intimately by God—and despite their great cost—he shoulders them and lifts us up as our friend, so that with his help, we might do the same for others. For no one has ever had greater love than this, and no one ever will. But all of us, his followers, are to be known by showing the world the same love shown to us by our Lord and our Friend. I pray that during this anxious Lenten season prolonged by pandemic, the world might know our special friendship with our Lord by the love we show each other that overcomes sin, sickness and even death, now and always; amen.