

## **PENTECOST 10**

### **“He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother”.**

A strange text, you may say. It’s not even biblical. I’m not sure myself of the origin of the saying. It might have originated in a song from the sixties, sung by the Hollies, called ‘He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother’, or it might have its origin in a story I once heard about two young brothers. It takes place in a Parish weekend conference. After listening to a talk of some kind, the people were asked to move to another room for the next item. One of the brothers was severely disabled and unable to walk. His younger brother was accustomed to carrying his disabled brother on his back. So, in the usual way, he lifted his brother on to his back. A kind man, who saw this, approached the boys and said, allow me to help to carry him. The young brother replied, “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.”

A biblical story which does highlight the same principle, but from a different angle, is the story of Cain and Abel. Cain’s harvest offering to God was the produce of the soil while Abel’s offering was the first-born of his flock. For some strange reason, Abel’s offering pleased God and Cain’s offering was rejected. This made Cain angry – understandably – but of course he went over the top and killed his brother. God then asked Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ ‘I don’t know, said Cain, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ A poignant question.

Friendship is a common theme in our readings today. St. Paul instructs the Christians of Galatia to bear one another's burdens - in this way, he said, we fulfil the Law of Christ: and of course the deep love which motivated the woman of the street who bathed the feet of Jesus with perfumed oil mingled with her tears illustrates powerfully the Jesus who is the friend of sinners..

True friendship is very precious and quite rare. A true friend, so writes the poet Raymond Beran, is someone who likes you - who accepts you as you are - warts and all. He writes this about friendship:-

"What is a friend? I will tell you. It is a person with whom you dare to be yourself. Your soul can be naked with him. He seems to ask of you nothing, only to be what you are. He does not want you to be better or worse. When you are with him, you feel as a prisoner feels who has been declared innocent".

One of the great joys of family life is to experience, as children grow to maturity, the parent - child relationship being gradually transformed into this kind of adult friendship. The time when our children become our friends is a great and wonderful experience.

Jesus was accused of being the friend of sinners. He accepted the friendship of so-called disreputable people. So Jesus was regarded as a law-breaker - a glutton and a drunkard - a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

In our Gospel for today a woman of the city (which probably meant a prostitute) entered the house of a Pharisee named Simon, where Jesus was a guest at a meal. (In those days people could come in and watch what went on - privacy was not regarded as important. She brought with her some expensive ointment and anointed the feet of Jesus. This was the action of a slave to a very distinguished guest. Clearly she herself was overcome by emotion as her tears began to fall on Jesus' feet and she wiped them away with her hair. Simon the Pharisee found the whole scene rather embarrassing - but Jesus used the occasion to illustrate the value of friendship. "It is the man who is forgiven little who shows little love", he says. Her sins - her many sins have been forgiven - therefore she is able to show great love. Likewise, when we are forgiven, we also, are able to show forgiveness to others.

The Pharisee's problem was that he assumed that sinners - people who had broken the laws of God - were to be excluded from the kingdom - whereas Jesus made it quite clear by his actions and his words that he had come into the world to befriend sinners and to save them. In spite of the overwhelming evidence of this, time and time again, throughout history, the Church has failed to grasp the truth. The Church is not a Haven for the righteous, but a place of refuge for sinners.

It is strange how the Church has seemed to favour the great titles of power and influence in addressing God. We say "O Lord our Heavenly father, high and mighty, The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the only ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers upon earth". One cannot help but wonder what our

Lord Jesus would think of such titles. According to St. John, Jesus preferred to be called a friend. "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends". Jesus gives a new meaning to the traditional titles - Master and Lord - by taking upon himself the form of a servant and being obedient even to death on a cross.

St. Paul also says in his letter to the Church in Philippi, "Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ. For the divine nature was his from the start; yet he did not cling to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave".

This bearing - a bearing of humility - is an attitude, not of judgement but of forgiveness - an attitude, not of exclusiveness but of welcome, - an attitude, not of righteousness in the law but of the Spirit of unconditional love - this is the bearing which we are called to demonstrate to the world for which our Lord died in order to save.

**AMEN**