



On the Virtue of Friendship¹

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"Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." John 15 v. 15

It goes without saying that friendship is important for almost everybody. But what exactly is friendship, and how does it come about? Is it just something that exists like the background microwave radiation of the universe, i.e. it's just there and most of us don't think about it very much. If it happens, it happens, and it's pleasant enough. If it doesn't happen, well, there's no use complaining about it. Or, is it the case that friendship is somehow an *active* state to be in and even something that makes demands on us. It might be appropriate and necessary for us to search out friendship; and, then, when we make friends, to keep our friendships 'in constant repair' - as Dr Johnson said.

Many thinkers have considered that friendship is more than just an epiphenomenon arising from the multitude of our other social connexions. Some have proposed that friendship is something we should consider as a virtue: that it should be cultivated and worked at because it provides us with profound benefits, not only as individuals, but in the communities and societies to which we belong. The state of being in a friendship is, of course, a highly pleasurable one and universally regarded as a good. But what else should we make of it, if it turns out to be something that, by being neglected, impoverishes our social relations both in particular and in general?

It is interesting to consider *when*, during the long process of the social evolution of our species, human beings first began to distinguish friendship from mere kinship or comradeship, and celebrate it as something desirable in itself. Aristotle considered that friendship was a highly significant part of human life in the *polis*. Being sociable animals, we make friendships; so it is worth examining how and why we make them. For Aristotle, there are three kinds of friendship.ⁱⁱ Some friendship is pleasurable (particularly friendships made by the young, where, shall we say, pulchritude is one of the governing factors) and it perhaps doesn't last long. Some is useful, and it lasts for as long as its utilitarian value endures. Finally, the friendship that exists between 'good' people is the sort that lasts longest, as they are attracted by and celebrate admirable qualities in each other "Between friends like these there are the feelings 'I trust him'; 'He would never do me wrong' ..." says Aristotle. Friendship is a necessary component of human fulfilment.

We might raise here the question whether we seek friendship in order to win personal advantage. But it does seem clear, and Aristotle is aware of this, that, if this is our approach, we won't find the best, most satisfying, form of friendship. We may make valuable networking opportunities for ourselves, and that may be a reasonable thing in itself: but, ultimately, friendship is something more than that.

When friendship flares into life, it will often transcend apparent social, tribal, racial and credal boundaries. Children quickly befriend one another in their earliest play groups and first schools, with openness and, one might almost say, plasticity. This is a vital component in their moral education and, of course, the process continues throughout their schooling. University life also provides bright young people with occasions for conversation about every facet of their life with able and like-minded peers.

ⁱThe contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

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Our College draws in men and women from all over the world to benefit from the magnificent resources provided here for us by our long stream of generous and visionary benefactors, to whom our deep debt of gratitude is acknowledged in this service. Many of us who have walked through the Great Gate have found that we have made friendships here which have lasted throughout our lives. A community that sees diversity as a positive advantage will throw people together whose ways of thinking and living differ greatly. Now, it might be that in some cultures, friendship is regarded as a social virtue because it helps to bond together people who are *already* of a common mind, or who originate from the same social grouping, to make them stronger. But it might also be that friendship, understood as a social virtue, has a much greater role in drawing together people of all sorts of different types and conditions and creeds. And the interesting thing about friendship, is that it can and does extend outside what might be considered to be a person's predicted range, and the social orbit in which they feel comfortable.

Aristotle wasn't the only thinker in the ancient world to scrutinize friendship and to try and work out clearly what it might be. Cicero also wrote about friendship in his *Laelius de Amicitia*, and his ideas were absorbed into early Christian thought by St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, both of whom developed new notions of friendship by fusing Judaeo-Christian thought with classical philosophy. Christian thinkers contributed the concept of agapeic love, which is very different from *philia*, as Aristotle describes and explains it – though Aristotle, in a striking passage, does explain how friendship "seems to consist more in giving than in receiving affection".

But is agapeic love, in itself, friendship? It would be tempting for me to bring in here H.F. Stewart's College prayer and talk about 'love of the brethen'. But the Christian notion of agapeic love is actually a rather different thing from friendship, though it may in some respects include it. After all, you are to love your neighbour as yourself and it doesn't matter at all who your neighbour is. And you are to love your enemies. You may not *like* your neighbour and you certainly won't like your enemies: but you are constrained to love them. That is the commandment. Now, it's no doubt good to *offer* friendship to all sorts of different people, but it will be difficult to befriend people you actively dislike. And, in fact, it will be insincere and dishonest. So we have to conclude, I think, that in our lasting friendships we do relate to those who are in some way sympathetic to ourselves, and there's no surprise or harm in that.

What does friendship mean in a more specifically Christian setting? We have already seen that Aristotle talks about friendship as a kind of opening up of the personality to a person whom one trusts. Well, that certainly seems to be the sort of thing our Saviour is explaining in the fifteenth chapter of John, where he talks about making his disciples his friends. And there is certainly, in the Christian context, an increased emphasis on open-heartedness and perhaps, we might say, tenderness in friendship. These things are evident in a short treatise called 'On Spiritual Friendship' written in the 12th century in the north of England by the Cistercian abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx. It is a serene, comforting and civilizing dialogue, at times even playful, and worthy of wider recognition.ⁱⁱⁱ



“We call friends only those to whom we have no qualm about entrusting our heart and all its contents ...” writes Aelred. Some friendships are carnal, he says, and some are worldly; but, he goes on to say, *spiritual* friendship “...which we call true friendship, is desired not with an eye to any worldly profit or for any extraneous reason, but for its own natural worth...” Created nature endowed our first parents, Adam and Eve, “with an attachment of charity and friendship, which an inner experience of love soon increased with a delightful sweetness”: and even after the Fall, friendship endures as a natural good, and “how happy, how carefree, how joyful you are if you have a friend with whom you can talk as freely as with yourself, to whom you neither fear to confess any fault, nor blush at revealing any spiritual progress, to whom you may entrust all the secrets of your heart and confide all your plans.” Aelred quotes from Ecclesiasticus, “*a friend is medicine for life*”, and exclaims “What a striking metaphor! No remedy is more powerful, effective and distinctive in everything that fills this life than to have someone to share your every loss with compassion and your every gain with congratulation.” The model for this is the friendship that our Saviour himself offers to us; but Aelred also quotes Cicero’s judgement that “those who banish friendship from life seem to pluck the sun from the universe, for we have no better, no more delightful blessing from God”.^{iv}

The foundress and benefactors of this College intended it to be primarily a place of learning and religion and research. They did not endow it with their property and wealth in order for those who reside here to sit around all day and make friends (a point not always entirely grasped by a small percentage of undergraduates). But, in what they provided, they have certainly built up an edifice in which friendship flourishes. I imagine that every member of the College past and present has found that he or she has made friendships here and that commonly some of those friendships turn out to be life-long. As the College website says on its front page, “one of the most valuable parts of studying at St. John’s is the community of fellow students, and that stays with you for life if you are a Johnian”.

I think it was Max Beerbohm (though I can’t find where), who when asked what he missed most about Oxford, said “the malice” – and to avoid sentimentality, I do also need to remark upon the fact that academic institutions, though noted for the quality of the friendship they breed, have not been immune from its opposite. The contributors to Peter Linehan’s wonderful new College History, while celebrating Johnian friendship, chronicle the various forms of *odium* that have spawned in the College at different times. It was in 1869 that one of the most famous rebukes in our history was delivered by Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, when, at the celebrations which accompanied the opening of the new Chapel, and standing, perhaps, where I am now, he delivered his crushing judgement upon another very great Johnian bishop, John William Colenso – an episode in Victorian intellectual history of almost operatic intensity.

Yet, one always hopes that ecclesiastical and theological debate (indeed all academic disputation) can be conducted with due courtesy, and even with a measure of fraternal love. Liz Carmichael, from the other St. John’s in the other place, recently wrote a magisterial survey of friendship in Christian theology and experience up to our own time. Alas, time doesn’t permit me to say more about her book than to commend it warmly to your attention. But let me give you the flavour of Liz Carmichael’s wise and humane conclusions. “The love of friendship discovered in this study”, she writes, “is love that sets people free to be and to become in their own individual uniqueness, and which is essentially directed towards, hopes for, and invites, reciprocal love and the joy of fulfilment in mutual relationship but without possessively demanding it. Friendship so understood is a fundamental attitude characterizing our whole approach to others.”^v These thoughts are apt for reflection and worthy of application here today.



Aristotle's instincts were strongly empirical. He started with how human beings are, and then considered it the highest exercise of reason to work out how they can best live. He is not concerned at first with individual flourishing, though that will follow; but his aim is to identify and define the attributes that human beings must cultivate, in order to live together in harmony, and so that their social and political institutions will function effectively. Of course, Aristotle made mistakes, because, sophisticated as he was, he didn't have our modern scientific understanding of the natural world; and, notoriously, his views about slavery and women were rooted in the cultural assumptions of his time. But he laid out methods of thinking that have been extremely influential ever since, most obviously because of Aquinas's masterly refashioning of them in Christian terms during the thirteenth century, and because of the vigour and persuasive power of some recent Neo-Thomism,

I would want to argue that the Abrahamic faiths give a better account of our purposeful and goal-directed behaviour than Aristotle does. After a long period of perplexity in moral philosophy, it seems to me that there is a growing consensus that emphasizing the virtues is an important and fruitful thing to do. As we educate our children and teenagers, and as we attempt to apply ethical standards in public life, we find we admire certain qualities that exist in some people, and we deplore other qualities which we judge, in the end, anti-social and destructive. A broadly Aristotelian conception of ethical reasoning fits well into the Christian scheme, and helps us to translate and communicate Christian ideas and concepts in ways which are accessible to people of all faiths, and also those who can't accept faith. This may be one of the ways in which we can claim to fulfil today the foundation aim of 'religion': especially if the core idea of 'religio' is found in those things which bind people together in a common (though virtuous) purpose.

If we value friendship as a virtue, we shall look outwards into the world with a readiness to connect constructively and creatively with the people around us. That makes a huge difference in all human societies. In a 'global' world, dare one say that the need for friendship becomes even more important: where so many new opportunities for social relations arise, yet so many of them are trivial and shallow, and not so much virtuous as *virtual*. In a world where entire communities continue to caricature and even demonize each other, the health-giving effect of real friendships made in places like this will be of vital significance in the future.

And so, in paying honour today to our foundress and benefactors, it seems to me that it behoves us to practise friendship, and to celebrate it. Some of us will do that by calling to mind our Saviour Christ who calls his disciples not servants but friends; and who provides us with our chief example of the way in which friendship can leaven and transform our lives. For in this resurrection season, we proclaim and hold fast to his everlasting love towards all his people, a love that death could not destroy. And we see in that enduring love the pattern for our own attempts to live in sympathy with other human beings in a lifelong relation that can withstand all the tests of time – in the virtue and grace of our friendships.

To whom be ascribed, with God the Father and God the Holy Ghost, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion and power, henceforth and for evermore. Amen.

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ⁱⁱ Aristotle considers friendship in books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and I have quoted here from the Penguin Classics edition (1953) translated by J.A.K. Thomson, and revised (1976) by Hugh Tredennick.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aelred of Rievaulx wrote *De Spiritualibus Amicitia* during the 1160s. These citations come from a recent English version: *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. with intro. by Marsha L. Dutton, (Cistercian Publications, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 2010).

^{iv} Cicero *Laelius de Amicitia* 13.47. The work was written in 44 B.C.

^v Liz Carmichael *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (T & T Clark international 2004) p.200.

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