

- What's the difference between a servant and a friend? This may seem to be something of a trivial question but it does have some depth and it does have a specifically Christian answer as defined by Jesus himself.
- You pay a servant to do things for you whereas friends are people you choose to spend the time of day with.
- In the days when a Rectory would have had a full retinue of parlour maids and gardeners; cooks and cleaners the socially conscious rector would not have considered it sensible to take tea with the scullery maid, or beer with the footman. It would demean his standing in the community.
- Instead, he, for it would have been he, would have coveted friendship with the squire and a dinner invitation from the Lady of the Manor.
- But actually the difference between servants and friends is more complex than that. I am very grateful for my friends, but if I spend my whole time taking from them, lapping up their emotional support, eating their cakes and asking for their help without any thought of giving of myself in return, then actually, really, they are servants rather than friends. To be a friend, over a decent period of time, the relationship has to be reciprocal: speaking as well as listening, offering as well as receiving, accepting as well as taking.
 - I guess most of us know what it feels like when the relationship gets out of kilter.
- Jesus gives a further more technical definition of what it is to be a friend rather than a servant. *'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.'*
- Jesus has made known to us, his friends, everything he has heard from his Father. A true friend has no secrets!
- It could be said at this point that Jesus' friends, the disciples, to whom he first spoke these words, were just as confused about much of what Jesus said to them as they had ever been. The crucifixion, despite Jesus' telling them beforehand, several times, was a complete surprise. In all four Gospels, it seems to be so. Jesus may not have had any secrets from them, for he certainly loved them perfectly in a way we can only poorly copy, but he certainly didn't manage to make them understand any more than we understand how God works.
- And that rings true with me. Because there is quite a lot about the way in which Jesus rules the world which seems surprising and odd to me. The age old question about human sinfulness. Why does God allow such terrible things to happen. I would do it so very differently if I were in charge! Do you frequently wonder what God is doing in his care for the world? Why he allows so many wars, so much unkindness, such inequality?
- Does it mean because you don't understand you not one of Jesus' friends? I am at pains to point out that I think you are! We are all in the same boat as the disciples who also did not understand what was going on.
- What we do understand is this. Jesus, through his followers, has told us clearly in the bible what God's plan for his world is. The overarching aim of God the Father, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, his beloved Son, is to bring the whole of creation, I believe with no exceptions, in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. Here are three quotes for John, from Colossians, and from Romans to prove the point.
- John, a few chapters earlier, has Jesus saying, *'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'* Not just some people. But the world. Not just human beings. But the world. We can argue the toss about the qualifying statement in the next sentence from John, but I believe that does not contradict the main point. In the end, all creation will be brought under the glorious liberating, loving rule of Jesus Christ.
- Paul in Colossians, speaking of Jesus, says a similar thing. *'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'* Not some things. Not some people. But all things!
- And again, Paul in Romans writes about nothing being able to separate us from God, and all because of Jesus. *'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* Everything in all creation is valuable and will not be wasted, will not be separated, will be saved!

- And all because of the death and resurrection of Jesus! That's love!
- If we accept that, then it does have certain implications about the way we live our lives; the way in which 21st Century humanity is systematically wrecking the delicate environment God has given us; the way in which we thoughtlessly inflict untold suffering on nameless individuals on the other side of the world by the choices we make about what we buy and how much we pay for it; the way in which so many people regard their own immediate happiness as paramount, wanting things today rather than waiting for the right time, self-obsessing about image and reputation at the expense of truth and compassion.
- I'm pretty sure that God saving his creation will mean that I am not going to be able to drive my car.
- I am pretty sure that God saving his whole creation will mean that you are not going to be able to order goods from the other side of the world at the touch of a button.
- And I'm pretty sure that Jesus completing the new Kingdom of God here on earth will mean that we are not able to live in centrally heated houses whilst there are still homeless refugees queuing up at our borders.
- But perhaps a simpler lifestyle, more local, where we are not immediately at the behest of phones, computers and deadlines with all their opportunities and all their dangers, might be quite attractive to many of us anyway?
- I put it to you that this is what Jesus came to do. To save God's creation, of which you and I are a tiny but perfectly formed and beautiful part.
- And if that's true, we do know what Jesus has heard from his Father. And therefore we are his friends. And we can abide in his love. *'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.'*
- Because remember, love is not just about being nice to people. Love is about relationship. It's about sacrifice and it's about taking the self-obsessive spotlight off yourself and putting it on someone else. That's what Jesus thought and did – par excellence.
- Which of course, is hopefully Good News to you and honey to your worried souls. But it doesn't leave us with a challenge. More a waiting game as we wait for God to save his creation and Jesus to bring in his Kingdom. After all Jesus, in the same reading, told us to go off and bear fruit. *'I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last'*. What is this fruit? Is it about doing extra things, being nice? Thinking of others? If so, I'm not sure I'm going to get very far. Is it about being successful, converting lots of people, saving the planet? If so, I'm certainly not going to get very far.
- Very briefly, look at the reading from Acts for some answers. In it we have Peter, the same disciple who heard the words of Jesus in John that we been talking about, going to talk to Cornelius, his friends and family, and accepting them, loving them and baptizing them. So far so good. But Cornelius was not a Jew. And up to this point Peter had firmly believed that salvation through Christ was only available to the Jews. But Peter saw their faith and who was blessing them and realised that Jesus was much bigger than that, God's plan was much broader than just the Jews. So his fruit was to include them. To baptize them. And to fight their corners with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to whom this was still an enormous shock.
- But because Peter was abiding in Jesus' love through the power of the Holy Spirit which had filled him with the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost, he responded to Cornelius because of his relationship with Jesus.
- Bearing fruit in Peter's case was not about going out to do lots of hard work, it was simply about allowing his relationship with Jesus to affect the way he lived his life.
- If, earlier when he had been prompted to go to Cornelius' house to see what was going on, he had found something more important to do, this little wonderful moment of abiding in in God's love would never had occurred. If he had not been big enough to expand his vision of who was in and who was out, where salvation was concerned, this little wonderful story would never had happened. But he did. And he was. And so it did! And he bore fruit. Fruit that undoubtedly lasted. Because we're still talking about it today.
- So, focus first upon your relationship with Jesus. And realise the bigger picture of what Jesus came to win and who and what he came to win it for. And expect the fruit to follow. Because you too have received his Holy Spirit. And wait for your horizons to be expanded as you listen for his voice. God has a habit of working like that. What is he saying to you?