

I Have Called You Friends, February 2019 (03 Feb - 02 March)

Friendship is at the heart of the Gospel and indeed friendship with God and our neighbour is the sole purpose of the story of salvation. This is the theme we have chosen for the month of February.

Our readings in the scriptures will point us to the often implied friendship that God longs to have with his people. In turn we are invited to be people seeking to cultivate the art of Christian friendship. It's not about how we make our churches friendly, it goes far beyond that idea. Christian friendship is about commitment to each other, it's about the "no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend" ideal. If we could begin to strive towards this ideal it would change the way we approach our relationships. Think of the various relationships we have and about the kind of investment we make into them.

During these weeks we will be challenged to think about:

1. Our friendship with God and our families and local communities.
2. The friendships we have that are cross-cultural and cross-generational.
3. The friendships we have with those we know who are seeking to know more about God and who think more deeply about life itself.
4. The friendship we all require to nurture with the culture and society that is around us.

*** 'I Have Called You Friends' is a reference to John 15: 15 ***

Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers.

| Date | Subtheme | Readings | Notes |
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| 03 February | Our Friendship with God and Neighbours | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jeremiah 1: 4-10 2. Psalm 71: 1-6 3. I Corinthians 13: 1-13 4. Luke 4: 21-30 5. John 15: 15 6. Galatians 6: 2 7. Matthew 5: 1-11 | <p>Our reflections this week will centre around the depth of the friendship God longs to have with us. It leads us to begin to think about the depth of relationship Christians are called to share in with each other. And finally we ask how should we be organising the church in order to develop community that is centred around reconciliation and harmony?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How Well Does God Know Us - Reflect upon the utter commitment of God's friendship to his creation and the purpose for which he made us. 2. Leaning on the Everlasting Arms - Reflect upon the psalmist's confidence in God as a friend and protector. 3. Moving from Leaning to Loving - Reflect upon the Christian friendship that goes deeper that invites us to move from loyalty to love. 4. Moving from Loving To Acceptance - Reflect upon Jesus' initial friendship within his community and the cost of befriending neighbours. 5. Moving from Acceptance to Commitment - Reflect upon Jesus' love and commitment to his disciples in the upper room gathering. 6. Moving to Burden Sharing - Reflect upon the depth of our relationships within Church. Do we have a best friend at church? How might someone access hospitality and friendship in church? 7. Beatitude Friendships - In summary this week's scripture invites us to be people who nurture and grow each other in bonds of friendship. Perhaps the bonds that can be grown in small groups within congregations can be mutually upbuilding for all. The Beatitudes help us navigate the need to live peace and harmony, reflecting God's gift of friendship to all his creation. |

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| 10 February | Our Friendships with the Next Generation | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Isaiah 6: 1-9 2. Psalm 138 3. I Corinthians 15:1-11 4. Luke 5: 1-11 5. I Timothy 4: 12 6. Ecclesiastes 12: 1 7. Matthew 19: 13-15 | <p>Our challenge as churches and as individuals is to develop friendships that are cross-cultural and cross-generational. For too long we have allowed the myth that young people and old people don't get on with each other to dominate the way we go about our relationships. You don't need to be a youth culture guru to know that young people may not connect with their parents but most young people adore their grandparents. The influence of granny is still paramount in many families.</p> <p>The challenge for the church is how do we communicate with the next generation. One thing is for certain The Church Without Walls Report was accurate when it said, "There can be no communication without community." We all bring gifts that can create spaces of welcome and hospitality for young people to belong. It is within that Community of a thousand welcomes, that the next generation will find faith.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Events Create Memories - Reflect upon this passage and see how the event of a king's death changed the life of Isaiah. Can events be a trigger of faith for some younger people? Can God speak through a national event, a music festival, a great historical event in the life of a nation? Are young people looking to find the connection, the belonging, long before the believing? 2. The Instant Music, Instant Text Generation - Reflect upon the importance of music in the lives of young people today. (Verse 1) The importance of instant responses from God to prayers can help belief mature. (Verse 3) Reflect upon the many challenging relational issues that young people today deal with. A God who answers in days of trouble gets a whole hearted vote of confidence. (Verse 7) Does an instant generation look for an instant God? 3. Passing the Faith Down the Generations - We are reminded that faith is passed on to the next generation in the telling and the living out of the Gospel in our everyday lives. It is this witness that verifies the truth of the faith. 4. They Left Everything and Followed - Reflect upon the enthusiasm of youth. Jesus is still able to inspire a generation to go fishing. 5. Christian Leadership and Ageism - Reflect upon the importance of young people being listened to as leaders within the church. 6. Know God Young, Love God Old - Reflect upon the idea that faith is often found when a person is in their youth. A young mind can be less cynical and often more open to the adventure of faith. 7. Learn From the Children - Reflect upon the fact that there is something wonderfully trusting in the relationship that children forge with adults. Jesus understood the importance of the child's way of thinking. He taught us if we wanted to build a relationship with God we needed to have the insight of a child. |

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| 17 February | Friendships with the Seekers and Deep Thinkers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jeremiah 17: 5-10 2. Psalm 1 3. I Corinthians 15: 12-20 4. Luke 6: 17-26 5. Luke 7: 31-34 6. Luke 15: 11-32 7. Luke 4: 18 | <p>We need to explore more the pattern that Jesus used when helping to explain faith to others. He walked alongside them. He met them where they were and journeyed with them. He was accused of eating and drinking with publicans and sinners. Jesus went on to say that he had come not to speak to the self-righteous but to those who know their need of God. This is what Christian friendship is about. Seeking to make true friendships that accept people as they are and what they long to be. Friendships that are willing to grow out of listening and respect for each other.</p> <p>The story of the walk to Emmaus illustrates a pattern of learning that engages all concerned. It is a more authentic way of understanding. It helps illustrate the value of journeys where we accompany each other and in doing so we discover more of God through the scriptures and our daily encounters with the Holy Spirit.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Walk and Talk and Open Up - Reflect upon what it is that is reassuring and energising about walking and talking with God in the company of believers and non-believers? Jeremiah reminds us if we trust in human wisdom and human strength we are never going to succeed. However he goes on to advise if we open up our lives before God, admit our failings, things can change. Failings can become faith links. 2. Does God judge you by the company you keep? - What is the context here? Is Jesus contradicting the writer of the psalm? Surely he sat with the people on the wrong side of the tracks? Perhaps tease out what it means to "walk in the counsel of the wicked". 3. One Central Truth for a Seeker - Reflect on the central belief we ask a seeker to believe. No resurrection, no forgiveness! 4. On Our Level - Reflect upon the depth of the friendship Jesus showed to those he healed. It interesting one of the translations says, 'He came down with them and stood on a level place.' Jesus levelled himself with humanity in order to communicate God's grace to us. 5. Hard to Please the God Squad - Reflect upon the importance of these verses in relation to what it means to be 'a church without walls'. 6. There is Always a Way Back - Reflect upon the story and the compassion Jesus helps us understand that God has toward those who make huge mistakes in their lives and are seeking to find a way back home. 7. How far would you go? - Reflect upon the categories of people that Jesus saw himself seeking to serve and ask how willing are we to be the hands and feet of Jesus in today's world? How far will we go to reach the same kind of people as he did? |

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| 24 February | Friendships with the World and Society | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2 Corinthians 8: 1-2 2. Romans 13: 1 3. Luke 8: 16-18 4. Colossians 3: 23 5. Galatians 6: 9-10 6. Ezekiel 34: 18 7. Luke 6: 31 | <p>In our reflections this week we highlight a variety of areas of society where Christians should be bringing their influence to bear. Earlier this month we reflected upon the importance of having dialogue with friends who are seeking to understand the Christian faith. Equally the church collectively or as a community requires to deal with the opinion formers and the wealth creators in society in order to help institutions and corporate bodies understand that the Gospel is relevant in the public square as much as it is in the private space.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends with World Church - Reflect upon the importance of following the traditions of the early church in their generosity towards each other and especially the poor. 2. Friendships with Politicians - Reflect upon the context of this passage and the importance of the church's role in speaking truth to power. 3. Friendship in the Media - Reflect upon the importance of a free press and the challenge of fake news. 4. Friendship with Commerce and Industry - Reflect upon the thinking behind a Christian work ethic. 5. Friendships as Carers - Reflect upon the example Christians have been to others in caring for the sick and needy. Julian's letter to Arsacius in the 4th century highlights the generosity of Christians. We are called to show the same kindness to strangers. <i>'Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause?' Julian the Apostate.</i> 6. Friendships with God's Creation - Reflect on our calling to be good stewards of the earth. We are only here for a short time before we pass it to another generation. The earth belongs to the Lord. 7. Friendship with Yourself - Reflect on this as a simple summary or rule of thumb as to how we should behave in society. |