

I find it difficult to hear today's Gospel reading without thinking of the hymn "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." and the story behind it. The author, Joseph Scriven, epitomised Christ's message of loving one another. He experienced God's deep, faithful friendship during a long and intense period of emotional pain. On the eve of his wedding, he saw his fiancée drown, after she was thrown from her horse, crossing a river to meet him. He sought a new life in Canada and, some years later, he became engaged again. This time his fiancée caught a chill while swimming, which developed into pneumonia and she died. Grief-stricken and lonely he prayed to God for comfort. God answered his prayer, and Scriven felt his burden lifted, and he wrote a short two stanza poem to express his relief and joy and posted it to his mother to encourage her to overcome her own illness. Scriven spent the rest of his life teaching, preaching and devoting himself to helping others, giving away his money, possessions and even clothing. He became well-known for selfless acts of kindness, such as cutting firewood for widows and helping the sick and elderly.

Returning to Ireland, to visit his family and friends, Scriven was snubbed and rejected by his former friends. Previously, he had once been quite well-off, but, having disposed of his worldly possessions, he now looked like a pauper wearing shabby clothes. God's healing of his earlier pain only strengthened his testimony under this new isolation of rejection by his friends. It became the inspiration for a third verse "Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer. In His arms He'll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there." Scriven's faith that God was everyone's refuge was unshakeable. On his deathbed back in Canada, a friend saw a handwritten copy of the three-stanza poem and asked Scriven if he had written it. "The Lord and I did it between us," he answered.

God has provided us with vital bonds of love in the form of complementary relationships: families and friendships. Families give us life, nurture and emotional development. Friendships extend this by providing the experiences that our families cannot. They each have their rightful place and purpose in God's design for our lives.

In John chapter 7 we read about Jesus. "Even His own brothers did not believe in Him". But Jesus drew strength and support from his earthly friendships. His disciples, particularly Peter, Andrew and John, with Mary Magdalene, the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus all had close friendships with Him. Jesus no doubt needed and valued these friendships. He was fully human, and relationships with other people are a vital part of what that means.

A friend has been defined as "someone who knows you very well but loves you anyway." And what better description can there be of God's love and friendship for us? Scriven wrote "Jesus knows our every weakness." God knows us far better than we know ourselves, He knows every secret and dark corner of our hearts and every embarrassing thing about us that we prefer not to talk about. Yet, He still embraces us with kind, compassionate love, generosity and grace. God's love for us is the third complementary relationship in our lives. We are blessed with the enormous kindness that is the essence of God's love. It is not earned nor deserved. It is the only thing that can save us. There is nothing we can do that would make God love us any more than he already does, or any less. We are saved only by the miracle of His grace, not only at the time of our receiving the Holy Spirit mentioned in the epistle reading, but in every moment since.

We sometimes say someone is willing to "give the shirt off their back" to describe their selfless friendship. But there is another far greater manifestation of sacrificial love. The one that Jesus demonstrated: "There is no greater love than that a man lays down his life for his friends" (v. 13). That is an expression of love without any limits.

It is important for us to know that Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us had always been preordained by God, and that it was always necessary for His own Son to die to save us. Revelations Chapter 13 and 1 Peter Chapter 1 tell us that Jesus is "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world," and that He was "chosen before the foundation of the world". God so loves us that he sacrificed His only Son. Love is the very essence of God's nature and His relationship with us. And love is the reason we were created. God wants nothing more for us than to know the blessing of His love, and to share that love with others. All love has its source in God: whether it is the love of our families, or friends, or fellow Christians, or the kindness to, or from, strangers.

Joseph Scriven found the reality of God's gracious friendship, even from within the depths of heart-breaking tragedy, and it completely transformed his life and consequently others. He came to realize that he was never without God's faithful help, and it is always as close as a prayer. God's unique friendship is equally available to every one of us, and it is indeed as near as a prayer. God is the most faithful, gracious, loving friend, who will never abandon us, who only wants the best for us, and who will help us to live our life to its fullest. Thank you, Lord Jesus for providing us with the door to such a wonderful life with God. Amen.

Pray Without Ceasing (What a Friend We Have in Jesus)

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.

Joseph Scriven 1855

Joseph Scriven's original poem

