

Sunday 29th December

Exodus 33.7-11a

1 John 1

John 21.19b-end

Sending and receiving Christmas cards is a great opportunity to catch up with friends, particularly old friends – perhaps friends from different areas and times in life. We have received Christmas cards from school friends, university friends, friends from where we lived 30 years ago, as well as friends we used to work with and more recent friends. Its lovely to hear of their news and share in the joys and sorrows of their lives.

And its often at Christmas time as we send and receive cards that we realise who the really GOOD friends are. Each year one or two people tend to ‘drop off’ our Christmas card list. Yes, they were part of our lives in the past, but time has moved on and we have moved on. They were friends for a season. Yet others – even if we don’t see them for many a year – will always stay on that list.

These are the kinds of friends that we know that when we meet up (and it is when rather than if –perhaps more in faith than in deed) – when we meet up we know we will be able to pick up where we left off perhaps many years before. These friends are the ones who have journeyed with us through our lives. Maybe at one time their journeying was very closely, and now it might a bit further away. But these are the friends who have kept us going on our journeys and still do and, we trust and hope, will into the future as well.

Travelling alone is less enjoyable and less fulfilling than travelling in company - any kind of journey is better when accompanied – and this is especially true of the journey through life.

On our journeys through life friends are the ones who urge us to keep going when things are a bit rough or we are tired. Friends are the ones we can turn to for advice when we are not sure which way to turn; friends are the ones who can help us and guide us; friends are the ones who we know will never let us down, no matter how stupid, inconsiderate or downright unpleasant we might be. They are always ready to forgive, always ready to encourage, always ready to see the best in us.

Our Old Testament reading today comes from the story of Moses, and I want to pick out one verse in particular. *The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*

What better friend to have on our journey through life than the Lord himself – the one who used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

I wonder - can we honestly say that our relationship with God is like that?

Today we remember the apostle John – John the evangelist or John the divine – he is known as either – the one to whom this church is dedicated. He was one of Jesus's closest disciples and the one who we believe wrote the gospel according to John, the 3 letters of John and, quite likely, the book of revelation.

John was one of the first to be called by Jesus to follow him. He and his brother James, along with Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen who Jesus called to follow him. They left their livelihoods behind to be with Jesus. As the story develops we soon notice that Peter, James and John became the three who were closest to Jesus. There was clearly a special bond of friendship between them.

Interestingly the gospel according to John contains no references by name to John as one of the disciples, but does refer to 'the disciple who Jesus loved'. This is widely taken to be John's way of referring to himself. The one that Jesus loved – so we can perhaps assume that John was the closest to Jesus. After all, he sat alongside Jesus at the last supper; he was there at the crucifixion when others had fled; he was the one to whom Jesus entrusted the care of his mother Mary.

So perhaps it is fair to assume that John saw Jesus not just as the Lord and master who he followed, but also as a close friend. Perhaps, similar to Moses, the Lord spoke to John face to face as one speaks to a friend.

So what would it be like to have that kind of close relationship with Jesus, with God himself? What would it be like to be able to journey through life in the company of the greatest friend of all?

Perhaps you see God as somewhat distant; a benevolent father figure up in heaven looking down on us; someone that we can pray to when things are rough and who might act to make things easier, but not much more than that.

Or perhaps you see God as an authority figure; one who sets rules for us to live by and stands ready to judge us, but who doesn't get involved in the routines of life. One who we are fearful of, afraid to admit what we are truly like.

Or maybe you see God as the creator, the one who set the world into being and now looks on from a distance but keeps his distance. One that you worship or acknowledge on Sundays, but who doesn't impact the rest of the week

Perhaps none of these adequately describe how you see God. But also none of them compare with the picture we have from Moses or John of a God who is like a friend.

But that is what God offers us. And that is what is shown most clearly in the message of Christmas, of God becoming one of us to live alongside us, as one of us. As John himself says at the start of his gospel, in the reading we had on Christmas Eve – the Word became flesh and lived among us, or as in The Message version of the Bible - The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.

God is a God we can relate to and be friends with. He is like someone who lives next door.

And we develop and nurture the relationship by spending time with him – just as we would spend time with a friend. Talking, listening, being aware of his presence. And just as our relationship with friends changes and develops over time depending on what we have experienced together and where we are in our lives, so our relationship – our friendship – with God can develop and grow over time.

We stand at the threshold of a new year. What better time to look to cultivating and growing this kind of relationship with God.

A relationship with a God who will be alongside you, involved in every moment and every detail of your life, at hand through good times and bad times. One who will speak to you as one speaks with a friend.

This is the God that Moses knew and called a friend; this is the Jesus – God with us - that John knew and was loved by. This is the God who can be your friend, who can be your companion, who can be your strength and help and inspiration and guide through the new year and the rest of your life.