



Engaging in Open Friendship

By John Taylor

One of the truly distinctive features of Jesus' mission was its openness to those who were marginalised in the society of his day. In a culture dominated by a purity system which gave economic, social and political power to a ruling elite Jesus befriends lepers, the poor, tax collectors, and women. In a culture where children were regarded as being intellectually underdeveloped Jesus calls all to become like a little child if they are to enter the kingdom of God.

Of course, we today have none of these taboos of 1st century Judaism do we? Or do we have taboos of our own? Much of the time in our culture we surround ourselves with those who are like us. We live in income segregated suburbs. We mix with people with similar interests to us. We talk politics only with those whom we agree with. We try to send our children to schools where they will be among their academic or sporting peers. It makes us feel secure to be among people who are like us, people who we like having around. Are we so insecure about who we are that we try to reaffirm our worth by surrounding ourselves with people who are like us? At its worst it is narcissism. Lockdowns and border closures during COVID 19, entirely rational from a public health perspective, seem to have also fed into the personal insecurities of some. At the same time, it seems that others realise that they really long for the associations that were such a part of their pre COVID 19 life. A friend of ours told me about some research she had seen about how people used the commuting time they saved from working at home during COVID. Basically, most people found all sorts of new things to do – from exercise to baking. When restrictions were eased they wanted to continue to work at home. Managers were the exception as they sadly used the extra time they had for on-line meetings.

To be part of the Body of Christ in any particular time and place requires a total rejection of narcissism. To quote and extend the Apostle Paul, in the Body of Christ there is neither male nor female, rich nor poor, slave nor freeperson, heterosexual nor homosexual. To be the Body of Christ requires open friendship. One personal experience might help to illustrate what I mean.

A few years ago I was sent by my university to Beijing to teach for a short time. We were accommodated at premises used by the Siemens company on the outskirts of Beijing relatively close to the airport. Some of the staff at the institute where I was teaching had taken me out to dinner at a local restaurant one evening. I liked the restaurant very much. The waiters were all dressed in traditional Chinese dress and called out in Mandarin the number of people who were entering the restaurant every time anyone walked in. I also liked the food which I was told was very traditional Beijing style food. So later in the week I decided to go to the same restaurant by myself. To my dismay I found that the restaurant only had menus in Chinese and none of the waiters seemed to speak English. So I decided to use an ordering technique that I had used in restaurants in China previously; I started walking around the restaurant pointing at what other people were eating and indicating that I would have that. While I was in the middle of doing this a group of young males sitting at a table started laughing and said 'Why don't you come and eat with us.' I did. There were all computing students and their English was pretty good. They were eating such 'blokey' stuff. There was scarcely a vegetable in sight. I had a wonderful evening. I suppose they were interested in me because I was a foreigner, I was different and I spoke English. They were, of course, amused by my plight and, to an extent, took pity on me. I think that is the sort of openness that we are called to. We are called to friendship not just with the people who are like us but especially with the people who are different from us.

But, I hear you ask, 'did those guys keep in touch with you?'. The answer is, no they didn't and I didn't follow up with them. While I have kept in touch, sometimes over many years, with other people I have met in chance encounters or at conferences I do admit that, in general, following up is not my strong suit. But actually, it would be impossible to keep in touch with everyone you meet. What is important is greeting others, no matter how different they or the circumstances are, with an attitude of open friendship. Doing this is part of the sanctification of everyday life that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. In a

culture where there were strict rules about who you should greet on the street Jesus in Matthew 5.47 tells his listeners to greet everyone.

Also, I hear you ask, 'isn't it easier to be friendly to people you meet by chance than it is to be friendly to people you see all the time or work with or have business dealings with?'. It can start to get difficult being friends with some people. You might have had unpleasant dealings with them. They might have done something really hurtful to you. You might just find them boring. This is where the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain get really tough for us: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.' (Luke 6.27, par Matthew 4.43). How can we do this?

We have to remember that Jesus speaks of a God who makes the sun shine on the evil and the good, makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust, who knows when a sparrow falls to earth, who numbers the hairs on your head, is analogous to a shepherd who rejoices when a lost sheep returns to the fold, or like a father who kills the fatted calf when the wasteful son returns, and a host who invites all to the feast. As the Apostle Paul realised, Christ died for us while we were yet sinners and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. I'm not sure that we always draw out the implications of these sayings of Jesus and these writings of Paul. About fifty years ago F Henry Edwards published a little book of his sermons called *All Thy Mercies*. The thing that most impressed me in that book was a paragraph in the Preface. There F Henry Edwards pointed out that while we are inclined sometimes to think that God only loves the righteous or loves them with special fervour the fact is that God loves each person infinitely. It would be impossible to love any one of us more than God loves each of us. That is a most profound and challenging observation. It is an observation that both affirms our own worth and the infinite worth of everyone else. There is no longer a need to affirm our own worth by surrounding ourselves with people who are like us. We can discover that what is common in the Community of Christ is knowing that each is loved infinitely. It can and should be the ground of our being the source of the hope with which we face the world and the future. It can open the door to the kind of friendship is that forms the foundation of a pluralistic community.

So what about the people who we have had unpleasant dealings with or who have hurt us? Does not open friendship extend to them. Our faith is that we are loved and forgiven by God and so are they. Having been forgiven we can and should also forgive. Jesus told Simon Peter to forgive seventy times seven. I think a problem is that if you begin by telling someone that you have forgiven them then implicitly you are telling them that you have judged them and

found them in the wrong. Perhaps the first step is to let the person know in a clear and civil manner that you have felt hurt. Your dialogue can proceed from there and can take various paths but ultimately they must lead to forgiveness whether expressed or implied. And when we forgive anyone we always need to remember that we all need and receive forgiveness from God.

What are some practical things that we can do to promote open friendship? Both the saying of Jesus and the twelfth chapter of the letter to the saints at Rome give us some good suggestions. One is practising hospitality. There are degrees and different kinds of hospitality. Since I retired at the end of last year I find that I have time to spend having coffee with local people who Janine knew but that I didn't know all that well before. Once we got to know people better and what their time commitments were we invited them for coffee or afternoon tea, or meals. We started sharing recipes, links to stories and music, and even cooking equipment. Janine and I also say to people that they are welcome to stay with us or on their own at our holiday house in the Blue Mountains and to go bushwalking or to check out other local attractions. In the process friendship is discovered. As we get to know people better we can become aware of and celebrate their joys and sensitive to and offer support for their problems. Jurgen Moltmann writes, 'Friendship combines affection with respect' (*The Spirit of Life* p255) and points out that a friend is not a title or a role or a function in society but is a personal relationship between people who have come to like each other just as they are.

Do we find open friendship in our congregations? When my son was about nine years old I was driving him somewhere, probably to one of his sporting engagements. For some reason we started talking about the church and he said to me something like, 'The thing I like about our church is that everyone gets to do something'. At their best our congregations are pluralistic communities founded on open friendship. This is not always easy. As the late American psychologist Erich Fromme recognised, love is something that you need to work at not merely a romantic sensation that you fall into. At their best in our congregations everyone has a say, neither the very old nor the very young are isolated, who we are or have been is not important but what is important is that we are. An additional challenge, though, is to ensure that our open friendship is extended outwards to all we encounter. To be a Community of Christ we must engage with and encounter humanity in all its diversity. Through open friendship we can experience the joy that it is to be human.