

Words can mean very different things in different contexts. Take, for example, the simple phrase, “how are you doing?” Relatively straightforward and benign as a throw a way line to a mate you’ve just met up with on the bus. But far more loaded and charged when said to a friend whose Mum is seriously ill in hospital. Where words are concerned, context is everything. Meaning shifts and the exact same words can carry a different resonance and intensity depending on the setting. And we do well to remember that whenever we engage with biblical texts and nowhere is that more true than in relation to St. John’s Gospel from which we’ve just heard a passage read. John’s words are always sounding in at least two different contexts. There’s the immediate story line which unfolds the narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry, and then there’s the specific community for which John was writing. This was a Christian group experiencing persecution and struggling to define itself amidst an increasingly hostile environment towards the end of the first century.

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for a friend”. Within the story of Jesus’ ministry and his impending death these words leap out as an interpretation of the sacrificial action Jesus is about to undergo. But within the context of John’s community the words will have taken on an added nuance, referring not only to Christ but to the very real possibility of sacrifice and martyrdom for Christians persecution.

For me too, and for my family and the small church community in Iran, these words have come to have very special significance. In the height of the revolution and as unrest and anarchy was sweeping through the country, our small community came to understand in a new way that faithfulness is costly and that sometimes the fullest expression of love and commitment requires self-sacrifice. The church has been stripped of its earthly assets, institutions have been closed down, properties confiscated and financial assets frozen. People have been imprisoned, many have left the country and others, including my brother Bahram, have been murdered. Bahram was 24 years old at the time and he became a scapegoat for our father who was the real target. As a Muslim convert and Bishop of the Church, my father had been imprisoned briefly and then escaped an attack on his life in which my mother was injured. In November 1979 he left the country for meetings in the Middle East but as the country fell further into chaos and anarchy he was advised by friends and colleagues to delay his return until things were safer. It was on 6th May 1980, 38 years ago today, that Bahram’s car was ambushed and he was shot in the head, dying instantly.

These words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for a friend” are carved on his grave just outside the city of Isfahan. So it’s an extraordinary set of coincidences that converge for me today. Not only was I invited to be here on what happens to be the anniversary of Bahram’s death but the Gospel reading set for today by the church lectionary includes the verse inscribed on his grave. With the story of the church in Iran as the backdrop, these words resonate powerfully in this chapel, connecting Oxford with Iran through the life and death of one young man.

I guess, even so, this talk of suffering and sacrifice - the cost of remaining true and faithful - may seem a bit far fetched within our context here in England, amidst this city of dreaming spires; our relative safety and freedom to worship in this green and pleasant land. But I’m afraid there is no escaping the fact that as Christians we are called to be faithful whatever the path we are to travel; be it easy or hard. These words, “No one has greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend” are framed within a passage in which Jesus establishes the nature of his relationship with the disciples – those who were his closest followers – as one of friendship. Not as master and servant, teacher and student, campaigner and fellow activists, philosopher and followers but as *friends*. “I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends”. Jesus defines friendship, by aligning it with the command to love one another as he has loved us (v 12), and with the concept of sacrifice which he

himself exemplifies. So we are being given a template for how to live in relationship with God and with one another. This is a model of friendship which has at its heart the wellbeing of the other.

It can be hard to comprehend this in an age where the term friend has lost some of its power. Where it's used quite loosely, not so much to describe real relationships as virtual ones. A while ago I was walking along the street near our home with my 13 year old son and as we passed another young boy my son whispered, he's a friend of mine on Facebook. "So why didn't you say hello?" "Oh I don't *really* know him ... he's just a friend on face book". And of course the more of those you have, the better it looks. That's a world away from the kind of friendship Jesus is describing here. I don't want to belittle the experiences of young people today – there's nothing worse than a middle aged woman bemoaning the glories of the past and of how it was in my day. And there are of course good things about social media which creates support networks and platforms for conversation and action in whole new ways.

But let's not forget also the call at the heart of the Gospel message which is about friendship based on a self-giving love that can be costly. I wonder what that looks like to you - what it means to you? And it's not just about faith for it says something about us as human beings first and foremost – to be human is to live in relationships; to be human is a desire to love and be loved; and the risk that entails is the pain of loss. Love isn't love unless its absence causes pain; friendship isn't friendship unless it desires what is best for the other regardless of the cost to self.

In offering friendship, Jesus was extending to his disciples unconditional love; drawing them in to a relationship that was for the long haul; to faithfulness even when the going got tough (which it soon would). Those early Christians who were the first readers of John's Gospel also understood this well. And today too this friendship is still extended to every one of us, challenging us to accept unconditional love and to remain faithful no matter what. And not just to endure suffering for the sake of it but because it gives us insights into the suffering of Christ, into the meaning of the cross, taking us closer into the heart of God. Just as the cross transformed evil, pain and death, bringing forth gentleness, new life, and hope; so too our suffering can, through faithfulness, be transformed, giving us insights into the suffering of others, making us ever more compassionate and Christ-like. The church in Iran continues to live this reality daily and in living it they experience something new about the nature of Christ's suffering and therefore the nature of God's self-giving love.

Tosca, this is the faith into which you are to be baptised and confirmed. May you know always that as a child of God you are loved and valued for who you are; may you be sustained and nourished through the ups and downs of your life and may your faith be strengthened daily as you continue to abide in God's love.

Jesus College, Oxford
Confirmation and Baptism during Choral Evensong
6th May 2018, Easter 6 (B)
John 15.9-17