

FRIENDSHIP AS HOLINESS

By RICHARD BUCK

TWENTY OR SO years ago, many of us were engaged in a feverish search for new ways to pray and new models of holiness which would help us make sense of being Christians in an increasingly post-Christian culture. Tradition seemed to go dead on us and the great spiritual classics of the past no longer spoke to our condition. For a time we flirted with Yoga or Buddhism or tried desperately to convince ourselves that a Teilhard de Chardin, a Thomas Merton or a Carl Jung would fill the God-shaped hole in our lives, but nothing really spoke to our heads and hearts with any urgency. The more radical theologians of the time may have exaggerated when they spoke of the death of God, but there was an uneasy feeling that he had at least gone on an extended holiday without leaving a forwarding address. At best, some of us eventually stopped panicking and learnt to sit quietly in the dark, hoping we would find with R. S. Thomas, that 'the meaning is in the waiting'.

In recent years, however, a discernible change has occurred. Once again the tradition is being reactivated as many religious orders and congregations return to source and rediscover their spiritual roots. The desert fathers and mothers, Cassian, Benedict, Ignatius and many others now seem relevant guides in the secular city, and the cloud of unknowing shows signs of thinning around the edges. The danger now may well be that we will come to regard the years in the wilderness as merely a temporary hitch in communication and forget the painful but salutary truths we learnt sweating it out in the dark.

In this new climate, the scriptural model which perhaps most accurately reflects our situation is the householder in Matthew 13, 52, who brings out of his treasure things both new and old. Great discernment will be required to hold together the *nova* of our recent desert experience and the *vetera* of the rich spiritual heritage of the past. In the light of this, one model of holiness which has its roots

deep in the past and also a special contemporary relevance is, I believe, that of friendship.

For too long now in a society obsessed with the mythology of romantic love, we have allowed the concept of friendship to be grossly devalued. Everyone, it seems, must elect to be either stranger or lover in relation to each other. Now, brought to our senses by the grim statistics of Aids as a fact of life and death, there is an urgent need to explore the neglected potential of non-genital relationships. Friendship is waiting in the wings to be rediscovered and Aelred of Rievaulx's treatise on Christian friendship may yet prove to be a tract for the times.

But the significance of friendship in the Christian life is not exhausted in terms of human relationships. We need to remember its venerable pedigree as a working model for the divine-human relationship as well. In the old covenant, Abraham and Moses were both designated the friends of God, and in the new, the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel transmuted the master-disciple relationship into one of friendship, but not of blind obedience. In John, chapter 15, the theology of this new divine-human friendship is spelt out clearly. Our friendship with Jesus is dependent on keeping his commandment, but that commandment is itself to love one another as he loves us. If we do that, then not only are we henceforth the friends of Jesus but of the Father also, who in turn send us the Spirit as a pledge of his continuing love. So the love relationship of the Blessed Trinity itself is expanded to include the new friends of God in a union sealed by the blood of Jesus as proof that men and women can have no greater love than to lay down their lives for their friends.

In subsequent centuries the implications of this divine-human friendship were to be explored by numerous mystics and writers, notably the so-called *Gottesfreunde* or Friends of God, in the fourteenth century. Aelred of Rievaulx earlier in the twelfth century, speaking out of a strong Cistercian tradition going back to St Bernard himself, could encapsulate this whole understanding of the God-man relationship in the bald statement 'God is friendship'.

More recently, however, due perhaps to an overdose of Counter-Reformation spirituality laced with a tincture of Jansenism, the idea that we might claim to be friends of God has been overlaid with a far more jaundiced view of the relationship. Instead of celebrating the union and communion God and humanity now enjoy in Christ, popular piety often encouraged an 'I am a worm

and no man' attitude towards God that fostered neurotic, guilt-ridden dependence on him.

God, for his part, also began to exhibit neurotic symptoms. He developed a remarkably thin skin and increasingly had to be protected from his insensitive and unappreciative creation. For some, he became the voluntary 'prisoner of the tabernacle', where he was held in protective custody for his own safety. For others, it became necessary to placate his wounded sensitivity with words and works of reparation for the blasphemous indignities perpetrated against him. The end result was that by the mid-nineteenth century, God was behaving suspiciously like a neurasthenic maiden aunt who was forever taking to her bed with attacks of the vapours brought on by our brutish behaviour.

Conversely, whilst the pious were putting on their kid gloves to handle the patient, academic theologians and biblical scholars were briskly dissecting him with the increasing array of instruments at their disposal. If exaggerated piety made it difficult for the faithful to feel comfortably at home with God, friendship with him was now also out of the question for the theologians, since subjective identification would be highly detrimental to the professional objectivity they sought to bring to their discipline.

One man in particular recognized this dangerous polarization in our relationship with God and pinpointed it in his poetry. Rainer Maria Rilke was in no sense an orthodox Christian and the God he writes about in his *Book of hours* cannot neatly be identified as the God of either the Christians or Jews; but his images continue to haunt and disturb the mind.

In one poem he paints an idealistic picture of a future in which there will be

No churches to encircle God as though he were a fugitive, and then bewail him as if he were a captured wounded creature—all houses will prove friendly, there will be a sense of boundless sacrifice prevailing in dealings between men, in you, in me.¹

In another he recognizes that what blocks communication between human persons and their neighbour-God are the very images and constructions we devise in order to communicate with him:

You, neighbour God, if sometimes in the night
 I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
 only because I seldom hear you breathe;
 I know: you are alone
 And should you need a drink, no one is there
 to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
 Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
 I am quite near.

Between us there is but a narrow wall,
 and by sheer chance; for it would take
 merely a call from your lips or from mine
 to break it down,
 and that all noiselessly.
 The wall is builded of your images . . .²

In other poems in the collection, this cosy anthropomorphism is counter-balanced by an apophatic recognition of the mysterious otherness of this same God:

You are the deep epitome of things
 that keeps its being's secret with locked lip,
 and shows itself to others otherwise:
 to the ship, a haven—to the land, a ship.³

It is this daring juxtaposition of immanence and mystery which prevents Rilke's God from shrinking into a caricature. In the end, neighbour-God can also evoke our awe: 'God, you are vast'.

Is it possible then to arrive at an understanding of the nature of friendship which can do justice to both proximity and mystery that God and humanity can enjoy in Rilke's poems? To find an answer we may need to turn from theology to so-called humanistic psychology. In her book *On being human: a systematic view*, G. Marion Kinget, for instance, stresses the key importance of friendship among the various forms of interpersonal relationships. In the following passage it is illuminating to substitute a divine-human pairing for the purely human one the author presumably envisaged.

Friendship is wonderfully free from side effects. It does not tend to turn into a one-way (or even a two-way) possessiveness, symbolic enslavement, or subtle exploitation as romantic love is apt to—or was apt to before marriage became genuinely optional for both male and female. Nor does friendship suffer from the torment of

jealousy, for it does not aim to monopolize. Granted this type of affective relationship is limited to small circles—the most celebrated instances of it consisting of only two parties.

Why is friendship thus limited? First, the chances of meeting persons that mesh with the self on a level of reality—as distinct from illusion or perception—and that offer an *authentic encounter* rather than a *role relationship* are not abundant in our society. Second, for a relationship to be ‘tested’ for comfortable and durable wear and for it to consolidate into friendship, it must extend over a suitable length of time. Third, since friendship is an active sharing, not some fond remembering or exaltation of a brief encounter, it requires—to stay alive and productive or, if you prefer, creative—a certain continuity or maintenance, hence a certain investment of time and effort.

More than any other affective relationship, friendship is an expression of the self and the principle of individuality. It rests not on body magnetism, random proximity, or interlocking roles but on affinities of the ‘self-structure’: configuration of values, interests, capacities, and attitudes that form the core of personality. The uniqueness of the person then, is the foundation of friendship.⁴

The Scottish philosopher John MacMurray had earlier suggested a similar understanding of the nature of friendship in his *Reason and emotion*:

If two people are associated merely for what they can get out of one another it obviously is not a friendship. Two people are friends because they love one another. That is all you can say about it. If the relationship had any other reason for it we should say that one or other of them was pretending friendship from an ulterior motive. This means in effect that friendship is a type of relationship into which people enter as persons with the whole of themselves. To ask David what he expects to get out of his friendship with Jonathan is to insult him by suggesting that he only associated with his friend for self-interest. No doubt he might answer that he gets everything that makes life worth living; but of course what he means is that he gets friendship out of it, which is exactly what he puts into it. This is the characteristic of personal relationships. They have no ulterior motive. They are not based on particular interests. They do not serve partial and limited ends. Their value lies entirely in themselves and for the same reason transcends all other values. And that is because they are relations of persons as persons. They are the means of living a personal life.⁵

In another context that could stand as a description of the prayer relationship which should exist between God and a man or a woman. Petitionary prayer which in the past has often been seen as an essentially imbalanced relationship between a humble supplicant and a powerful deity, now takes on completely different overtones. Jürgen Moltmann in *The open Church* puts it like this:

Request and answer are the two sides of friendship with God. And friendship with God gives prayer that certainty that it will be answered ... Prayer and answer are what constitutes human friendship with God and divine friendship with human beings. It seems to me important to place both the praying and the answering on the plane of friendship. For then it is a relation of mutual affection and of respect for freedom. A friend asks out of affection; but at the same time respects the other's freedom ... Prayer in Christ's name is the language of friendship.⁶

Noli me tangere is not only the response of the risen Christ to Mary Magdelene, it is also the essential requirement for a right prayer relationship with God. Again, Rilke recognises the truth of the matter:

God, do not lose your equilibrium.
Even he who loves you and knows your face
in darkness, when he trembles like a light
you breathe upon—he cannot own you quite.
And if at night one holds you closely pressed,
locked in his prayer so you cannot stray,
you are the guest
who comes, but not to stay.⁷

Could it be that this is what has been happening to us? That what subjectively felt like rejection by a much loved parent was in fact, a painful but necessary weaning process? We clung so desperately to him, confusing need with love, and had to be detached gently and left apparently unsupported until we, too, discovered our equilibrium and could begin to envisage a new, less neurotic relationship with him. Bonhoeffer perhaps was wrong to speak of man coming of age; it was the child discovering that self-identity which inevitably brings with it the sense of separation.

The final great transmutation of the father-child relationship from one of total dependence to that of loving friendship is a costly

one for both parties. Both have to learn to let go as the waiting father clearly recognized in the parable of the prodigal son. Separation then becomes a necessary stage in that process of growth called holiness.

This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only dreadful thing and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing worthy of honour and desire.⁸

NOTES

¹ Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Poems from the book of hours* trans. Babette Deutsch (London, Vision Press, 1957), p 41.

² Rilke: *op. cit.*, p 13.

³ Rilke: *op. cit.*, p 37.

⁴ Kinget, G. Marian: *On being human: a systematic view* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p 105.

⁵ MacMurray, John: *Reason and emotion* (London, Faber and Faber, 1935), p 100.

⁶ Moltmann, Jürgen: *The open Church* (London, SCM Press 1978).

⁷ Rilke: *op. cit.*, p 47.

⁸ St Gregory of Nyssa: *Life of Moses*.