On modelling relationships

Jesus, men and friendship

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IN THE CHAPEL OF THE COLLEGE in which I serve as chaplain are a number of stained-glass windows depicting Jesus. Some are made up of late medieval glass bought on the continent by Wilkins, the mid-nineteenth-century architect who designed the building. They show an elegant, pale-skinned and flaxen-haired, slightly emaciated Jesus – the Jesus of late-medieval devotion, a Jesus who stands accused and reviled, his suffering face infused with profound philosophy and compassion.

Other windows were crafted especially for the neo-Gothic building; their colours are more vivid, the scenery much busier with detail, the artistry less delicate. The Jesus of these windows is made to match the earlier medieval glass, and they carry on the narrative of his passion and death and resurrection. The later Jesus who carries his cross, who hangs upon it above the altar, this Jesus is of the same pale complexion and fair hair, yet he differs from his earlier form. The later Jesus is less delicate, less emotionally drawn, more solidly athletic, as if his saving work is an heroic act, a kind of moral project. Indeed, as this Jesus hangs on the cross he does not seem to suffer so much as stoically to endure. The backdrop for this nineteenth-century English Golgotha is of stern Roman arches, as if his death occurs in a kind of amphitheatre. This Jesus is a model of theological transaction by which God redeems humanity.

Differing Jesuses

Differing Jesuses, each the product of an historical culture, theology and piety; images transported, modified and put to particular purposes – these model Jesuses in glass become depictions of the artists and communities creating and consuming them. This is how it always is and must be: wherever Jesus is formed in art or text or spirituality, then in part we create Jesus in our own image, even as we depict him as that which we are not but long to become. Those who gaze upon Jesus conscious that he is always a *depicted* Jesus should foster an awareness of

> other people's propensity to create the Jesus who embodies their own aspirations. Simply because he is admired and believed in, he is constantly remoulded in order to be acceptable. The higher the faith, the stronger the tendency to distort.[1]

Whoever perpetrates them, such images signify the richness of meaning which Jesus represents. As Houlden points out, the New Testament texts themselves bear witness to this variety of belief. The gospel accounts of Jesus, when set together, complete the picture story of his life, death and resurrection. Yet these accounts each have their own character and tone, the product of individual and corporate patterns of belief and of pastoral and missionary needs and objectives.

Mark's Jesus is mysterious; Matthew's is authoritative, the teacher of moral guidance who at the same time exceeds accepted teaching. Luke's Jesus is attractive, generous in spirit; John's Jesus is as heavenly as he is human, the embodiment of divine word, wisdom and judgement. These Jesuses do not rival or discount one another, but they can speak differently if allowed to do so, and each offers something distinct, as do the Jesuses of the Pauline writings and of Hebrews, Acts and Revelation. Models of Jesus which are drawn from across the different texts, weaving together strands to present him in particular ways, these broad approaches to Jesus are *representations*. Their particular distortions say something particular about Jesus and something about the distorters' particularities.

Mindful of the limited or distorting nature of modelling Jesus, I want to explore the notion that the model of Jesus as friend, and of his life and ministry as an expression or form of friendship, is a model which may usefully inform the Christian conduct and theological understanding of relationships. In particular, I want to explore the model of Jesus' friendships as a pattern which may inspire men in their relationships with one another and with women, children and the divine. In setting about this, I need first to set out some more distortions which will inform the construction of a Jesus-model of friendship.

Friendship as personal; the personal as particular

As a person and as a pastor, I find loneliness particularly hard to bear. It is what I most fear for myself, and it is what I find most difficult to accept in others. Though I know well the conventional

piety about solitude and self-acceptance, still, when facing a long period of time without others I find it always a struggle to be by myself. The cold waters of loneliness can lap even when I am busy or occupied with others or relatively self-absorbed; there is always the prospect of going home to an empty house, or into time which is unallotted in the diary – blanks in the schedule, blanks within.

I love my friends. I value them for their humour and hospitality, their wisdom and sound advice, for their kindness, loyalty and patience, for their interest in me and their willingness to talk about themselves in response. I like to hug and kiss my friends and to shake their hands because in so many differing ways they are beautiful and admirable and receptive, and my encounters with them bring me alive to myself. Yet I can use my friends as barriers, as a dyke which fends off that cold sea of emptiness, almost as drugs to lessen the dull interior pain which is the fear of being lonely. At these times I seek the company of others without being a true companion; I am present only so as not to be by myself. At these times I am with the friends I so admire and love more because of my own needs than out of love and admiration.

This fear of loneliness within myself I mention at the outset as a way of declining pretensions to objectivity or universality in this discussion of friendship. I shall not attempt to define friendship. Friendships arise out of particular needs and circumstances; they spring from the particular desires and commitments of individuals in community. They are generosities born of special limitations. They are restricted zones in a world of easy access – relationships of intimate conversation or of acceptable silence kept apart from the garrulousness of our age. They are places of touch or of not touching, kept apart from compulsory or forbidden physical encounter. So any reflection I may make on friendship in the light of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels will be personally slanted. Furthermore, it will be gendered.

Abandoning the theology of the invisible man

In constructing our theologies, men have tended to forget that what we do we do *as men*, and that what we do as men we do only in relation to women. Our identity as men is constructed as much by who and what we are not (woman), as by who or what we are 'in ourselves' (man).

Feminist theologians, in articulating theologies from the perspective of women, have begun to expose the limited nature of men's theologies, showing how what is enacted, written and taught as universal truth or tradition is particular and gendered, arising out of specific contexts, and very often loaded to articulate and protect the interests of existing power relations which benefit men. Men of power – those who enjoy the exercise of power over others – have rarely acknowledged themselves as such within the texts and practices which seek to articulate divinity. Men's power has been assumed, or has been established as divinely ordained, and men's understanding of themselves as men, their *masculinities*, have incorporated these power relations. Men are formed by patriarchy as well as being formulators of it because our ways of being men are constructed for the display, enjoyment and perpetuation of male power.

Though it is largely women whom this patriarchy works to dominate, it is domination – the inequality and abuse of power – which is the life-blood of patriarchy rather than misogyny. Those designated 'greater' will seek to exercise power over those whom they designate 'lesser', so that children and many other men – men who are poor, gay men, black men – will also be exploited and marginalized within certain structures. And these men may, within different structures, seek to dominate others. Patriarchy thrives on hierarchies of control in the exploitation of injustice. Misogyny, racism, homophobia – prejudices and phobias of all kinds – these are the ideologies of domination which sustain injustice. Masculinities may function in support of these various relationships of domination, or may be developed in response to them, or in subversion of them. Men's ways of being men are expressions of power and powerlessness in relation to other men as well as in relation to women.

As I turn my attention to the portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels, seeking a deeper understanding of friendship in and through the friendships of Jesus, what I see and how I interpret what I see will be an expression of my maleness. My gaze is the gaze of a man who considers the life and relationships of another man described in four texts which are themselves the product of (most probably) male writers, influenced by the gender relations of their own communities. So the image of Jesus I perceive is the partial one which my own context and the contextually formed material of the Gospels allow me to see. My interpretation will be *interpretive*, an expression not so much of 'ideal' friendship found in Jesus for all times and places, as a consideration of Jesus and of friendship in the light of Jesus

which is formed by the needs, assumptions and partial understandings of my own time and situation.

Men and friendship: some contemporary issues

This is a time in which men's relationships are under scrutiny and reconsideration. Feminism and the women's movement initiated the critique of patriarchy, and men have responded to the challenges to male power by women, and by social and economic changes such as the transformation in patterns of employment, by seeking to redefine their self-understanding and re-examine their conduct in relationships.[2]

This reconsideration is limited, both in the numbers of men who are engaging in the process and also in its scope, but it is significant and ongoing. It touches upon key aspects of individual and communal life. It involves the attempt to foster more emotional self-awareness in men and to nurture more free and constructive ways of expressing feelings, particularly so as to reduce verbal, physical and sexual violence. Men are seeking to develop the capacity for greater intimacy with one another and to tackle the fears sometimes associated with close male friendships. Men are seeking to foster an integrated sense of self which does not objectify the body, and to accept the variety and complexity of sexual desire, and to negotiate intimacy through being less performative and more communicative lovers and husbands. Men are beginning to acknowledge the damage done to themselves, organizations and others by competitivism and achievement-orientated notions of work and relationships. Men are re-examining the place of work in their lifestyles and identities; they are seeking to challenge and change the personal and societal aspects of masculinities which damage men and reinforce in them attitudes that seek to dominate, violate or demean 'the other' – particularly women, gay men and black people.

There is a perceived desire to heal father–son relationships and to seek social and personal ways for men to be more nurturing and involved fathers to their own children. There is a felt need to promote positive models of masculinity among boys and to provide boys with safe processes in which to negotiate their way to manhood.

Modelling relationships: Jesus and friendship

The study of friendship is not new. The ancient philosophers celebrated it and reflected upon its meanings and proper conduct (among men). The Old Testament narratives of Jonathan and David, and of Naomi and Ruth, tell of the exceptional love and strength to be found in intimate friendships. The psalms delight in 'brethren dwelling together in unity' and lament the bitter pain of betrayal by friends. Within the Christian tradition the Gospels have inspired a spirituality of friendship which has been given beautiful expression in the twelfth-century works of Aelred of Rievaulx, *The mirror of charity* and *Spiritual friendship*, writings which reflect particularly upon friendship between men. For Aelred friendship is rooted in mutual love rather than admiration or self-interest; the love of friendship leads into the experience of the love of God embodied in Jesus – who himself enjoyed special love for and intimacy with his closest friend, the 'Beloved Disciple'. Christian communities are to be characterized by this love between friends, which is a relationship of emotional, psychological and spiritual support.

Practical theologies of spiritual friendship find an evolving communal embodiment within the spirituality and fellowship of the Society of Friends, which has long practised equality between women and men, and more recently between people of diverse sexual preferences. In a more devotional vein, reflections such as Charles Smyth's *The friendship of Christ* (1945) find in the model of Jesus as friend an assurance of divine love for humanity and an appeal for personal, loving devotion for God in Christ which is both rooted within and yet also exceeds the love of human friendship.

More recently, Mary Hunt's *Fierce tenderness: a feminist theology of friendship* (1991) has presented a model of friendship as the central form of relationship around which to develop theology and ethics beyond the hierarchies of patriarchy. Elizabeth Stuart's *Just good friends* (1995), written from a lesbian-gay feminist perspective, explores what impact such a central model of friendship might have on our theological understanding of 'sexual' relationships. For Stuart, the model of 'passionate friendship' which is found in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the conduct of Jesus in the Gospels displaces the exclusive and oppressive model of (heterosexual) marriages as the defining model for sexual relationship and introduces an all-embracing concept and practice which 'enables Christianity to face up to the reality of people's diverse and complex

experience of human relationships'.[3] This model of passionate friendship is able to operate within differing patterns of relationship, including that of marriage, because it does not rest upon unjust power relations in terms of gender and sexuality, but is plastic, to be negotiated between partners, associates and friends as particular circumstances allow. A presiding model of friendship would inspire such virtues as mutuality, the common pursuit of justice, the negotiation of emotional and physical intimacy, in all forms of relationship.

Interpreting the friendships of Jesus in the Gospels

For Stuart it is this kind of intimate friendship which characterizes the life and relationships of Jesus:

> The only model of relating that we can definitely see operating in the life of Jesus, as presented to us in the gospels, is friendship – and it is a way of being friends which exposes the passion behind friendship. One could say that the essence of Jesus' ministry was simply befriending – the forming of mutual, equal, loving, accepting and transforming relationships.[4]

This 'passion' is not necessarily sexual in the genital sense, but is an holistic and profound mutual engagement with others, a model of relating which is of particular significance for Stuart's feminist and lesbian-gay theological project. Jesus' friendship is with women, gay men and foreigners.[5] Yet it is the character of this relating, as well as the generous range of those with whom he relates, which constitutes friendship. Jesus encourages mutuality in relationship, fostering 'equality' in his denial of domination (as in John 13 for example) and through his empowerment of his disciples to participate in the teaching, healing and preaching of God's kingdom, an equality of relationship leading to transformed living, which is most powerfully expressed in the Johannine theology of mutual indwelling (John 14 and 15). Furthermore, this friendship challenges the dualism of Christian tradition through its attentiveness to physical needs, its enactment in feasting and communal drinking, and the spirituality and ethics of Jesus which incorporate the bodily. This friendship is 'a passionate concern for people as embodied beings in need of loving touch'.[6]

Yet for Smyth, friendship cannot be a mode of relating in general. For him friendship is, by the very nature of its mutual trust, specific

and limited to particular persons; love is the mode of general behaviour towards others. 'Friendship is a contracting, love an expanding relationship. Friendship concentrates our affection: love distributes it.'[7] This love we have come to know through the friendship of Christ towards us, and our status as friends of Christ is, in Smyth's terms, 'unsentimental': we are friends of Christ in that he has disclosed to us his (God's) purposes: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (Jn 15:15). Yet this knowledge is a source of spiritual strength which informs individual conduct and 'sustains' the disciple to be 'an agent' of Christ in obediently keeping his commandments of love within and through the fellowship of the Church.[8] The friendships of Jesus in the Gospels, such as his friendships in John's Gospel – with Lazarus, Mary and Martha (Jn 11), with Peter (Jn 21: 15, 16), and with the Beloved Disciple (Jn 20) – will 'teach us something of what our own friendships ought to be; and . . . in some measure let us into the secret of how Christ befriends us and how His friendship influences our lives',[9] but they do not take us toward the form of physical, sexual and emotional intimacies which, in Stuart's model, may be negotiated between persons after the example of Jesus. Sexuality and gender are not, explicitly, part of Smyth's agenda. He writes, of course, as a man of his time, seeking to communicate the spiritual discipline he found appropriate for his situation. For him the friendships of Jesus endorse the orthodoxies and orthopraxis of the institutional (Anglican) Church. The situation which gives rise to Stuart's project is different – and yet, for both Stuart and Smyth, though articulating radically different theologies, the model of Jesus' friendships is one which argues for an allegiance to theological values which have implications for right conduct extending beyond the immediate network of relationships, whilst also affecting those relationships.

Relating as a man: a model Jesus from the Gospels

In drawing out from the gospel account of Jesus' relationships a model of friendship – both in the particular and in general – we find an inspiration for men to respond constructively to the current issues around masculine identity and the conduct of relationships with one another, women, children and the divine. We can read all four

Gospels as suffused with the light of the final discourses in John's Gospel, where Jesus names his disciples 'no longer servants . . . but friends' (Jn 15:15). The Gospels show Jesus, in his teaching and conversation, sharing with his disciples the meaning of his mission and his special participation in God's purposes. He takes the risk of self-revelation which is a mark of friendship, giving others access 'into' himself. This friendship is with women as well as with men (the women who went about with him (Lk 8:1–3) and accompanied him to the end, and those whom he met more casually, such as the Samaritan woman at the well), and also with children (Mk 10:13). In so doing he opens up to them the core of his identity as a person: who he is and what he believes himself to be about. The special friendship Jesus enjoys with the Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel is a symbol of the value these friendships hold for Jesus, and of his capacity for intimacy and of his 'at homeness' with his body and sexuality (most powerfully the image of the friend lying with him at dinner in John 13:23).

This friendship is always mutual. That the Gospels are full of sincere and open conversation is a clear demonstration of how Jesus set about forming relationships. Jesus talks with all sorts and conditions of individuals and groups. He is profoundly attentive to others, making connections with their personal worlds: to Peter (as 'rock', Mt 16:18; as one who denies his friend, Mt 26:34, as one who loves and serves out of love, Jn 21:15ff); to Mary and Martha as he shares their grief at the loss of Lazarus, his friend (Jn 11), and as he enjoys their hospitality and careful attention to himself (Jn 12); to Mary Magdalene in her need for healing (Lk 8:2) and for comfort in her grief (Jn 20:11), which is also an empowering of her to undertake ministry to others (Jn 20:17ff). He attends to the hunger of others, to their sickness and to their spiritual quests and poverty. And Jesus has vulnerabilities himself: he is not afraid to express his hunger, his thirst, his need for support, rest, solitude and spiritual nourishment. He is a man who can eat, drink, party, lie with his best friend in his arms, fast, pray and in a variety of ways enjoy himself whilst remaining himself. He does all these things *as himself*, so that we might see Jesus as a man who has befriended the whole of himself, body, mind and spirit. His wilderness times are a reminder that work was not his obsession, and that his relationships were not to fend off a fear of being alone with himself. Yet Jesus' times of solitude do not suggest that masculinity is autonomy. He accepts the cost of relationship as well as its pleasures, and he gives

expression to the hurt and loss that the intimacy of friendship and relationship can bring: in weeping for his friend Lazarus (Jn 11:35) and for the city of Jerusalem (Lk 19:41), being angry at misinterpretation (8:33), and suffering the rejection of betrayal and denial and abandonment by friends that is the risk of authentic friendship. In Jesus we see a man who connects with his emotions rather than stifles them.

Though Jesus dies alone on the cross, his suffering is not that of a solitary male, but one who suffers in a community of friends gathered around his suffering: a body of suffering friendship in which new intimacy is created between women and men, relatives and friends (Jn 19:25ff). This love which Jesus shows in 'laying down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:12ff) is not an abstract, unattached love. It is love *for his friends*, and so his self-sacrifice is not only physical but also affective and relational. He lays down a body of relationships, and it is a body of relationships which is resurrected in his rising. His resurrection is a return to his friends with forgiveness and healing, peace and mission together. Even here he does not eliminate doubt (Jn 20:24ff; Lk 24:38ff; Mt 28:17) or forget to reassure those who are afraid (Lk 24:36). The risen Jesus is known once again in a shared meal (Lk 24:13ff) and in the gathering of friends. In his living and his dying Jesus continually develops a community in which friendships can be formed and extended, a safe place in which competitiveness and the domination dynamics of patriarchal power are abandoned for relations of mutual care and service (Jn 13). In this model Jesus' teaching and embodiment of the kingdom inspires us to imagine the closeness, generosity and creativity of friendship with God. It is as if the kingdom of God were a kingdom of friendship[10] in which God is worshipped as one to whom glory is accorded not through force or terror, but as a matter of choice and of personal realization in love. This Jesus conveys God in such a way as to allow a relationship of faith to grow as friendships grow. Here 'fatherhood' and 'sonship' are not relations of control and submission, but relations of mutual trust, intimacy and love. This is the pattern for men's relationships.

The friend as contemporary hero

In his recent history of intimacy Theodore Zeldin has suggested that the model of a strong and coercive man is useless for the present age of personal autonomy:

> The obsession with domination and subordination is beginning to be challenged by a wider imagination, hungry for encouragement, for someone who will listen, for loyalty and trust, and above all, for respect. The power to give orders is no longer enough.[11]

It may be that Jesus as friend is just such a model of mutuality and respect in his dealings with others and in his sense of self. Could men follow Jesus in seeking friendship through their various relationships (as father, husband, lover, pastor, teacher or whatever), rather than seeing them as situations in which to establish and exercise control?

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NOTES

1 J. L. Houlden, *Jesus: a question of identity* (London: SPCK, 1992), p 8.
2 For a discussion of the literature and ideas around masculinity, and for their theological implications, see my *Finding a voice: men, women and the community of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1996).
3 E. Stuart, *Just good friends: towards a lesbian and gay theology of relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p xv.
4 *Ibid.*, p 168.
5 For an example of Stuart's reflections on Jesus' relationship with women see her treatment of the woman's anointing in Mk 14, pp 148ff; for his relations with gay men, see her interpretation of the healing of the centurion's servant (his lover) in Mt 8:5–13, Lk 7:11, Jn 4:49–54, pp 159ff; and of his relationships with outsiders such as the Samaritan woman in Jn 4, p 161ff.
6 *Ibid.*, p 172. See also the discussion of Jesus' holistic approach, pp 145ff.
7 Charles Smyth, *The friendship of Christ* (London: Longman, 1945), p 35.
8 *Ibid.*, pp 36ff.
9 *Ibid.*, p 72.
10 Note Aelred's interpretation of 1 Jn 4:16 in his *Spiritual friendship*: 'God is friendship; and those who live in friendship live in God'; see Van de Weyer and Saunders (eds), *The spiritual kiss: the vision of Aelred of Rievaulx* (London, 1989), p 33.
11 Zeldin, *An intimate history of humanity* (London, 1994), p 135.