Biblical Friendship

A Sermon on 1 Samuel 20

This morning's passage constitutes the emotional heart of what is often regarded as *the* great portrait of friendship in the Old Testament. David and Jonathan's friendship is a friendship abounding in loyalty and affection; that negotiates reversals of personal fortune that test friendship's longing for reciprocity and equality of status; it's a friendship that powerfully illustrates what can happen when the claims of family and friends come into conflict with each other, and it does all these things in the context of the years leading up to a bloody and protracted civil war in which Saul's descendants will lose out to the superior *nous* and military prowess of the former courtier-turned-warlord, David, son of Jesse the Bethlehemite.

Last week I identified this larger context with the so-called 'History of David's Rise,' that is, the stretch of narrative extending from 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Samuel 5, and before we enter into the passage we've just had read out to us, we'll do well to glance quickly over this story as it has unfolded over the three intervening chapters.

Our passage last week ended with David, clandestinely anointed by the prophet Samuel, installed in the Saulide court as none other than Saul's armour-bearer. The following chapter, chapter 17, notoriously provides a second version of the initial meeting between David and Saul, with Saul placing his own armour on David prior to the latter's contest with Goliath, an action which ironically foreshadows how everything of Saul's – the affection of family members, the loyalty of his subjects and finally his very kingdom – will likewise find its way into the hands of his younger rival. In chapter 18 Saul's mounting jealousy of David leads him dangle before him the hand of his daughter Michal, for which he sets the gruesome bridal-price of a hundred Philistine foreskins. The Philistines, however, fail to polish off Jesse's son, and Saul, now with his great rival as son-in-law, takes matters into his own hands, hurling his spear at David as the latter plays upon the lyre, then, in a further attempt at murder, dispatches men to assassinate David, whose wife in effect chooses her husband over her father as she bundles David out of their house via a window to safety.

Chapter 20 – our chapter – now shifts the focus to David's relationship with Michal's brother, Jonathan. Jonathan entered the Book of Samuel back in chapter 13 as a valiant warrior, whose pluck turns a desperate situation for the Israelite army into an unlikely victory, but whose unwitting violation of a ritual prohibition on the very same day leads to his being cursed by his own father Saul, then almost stoned, a fate from which he is rescued only by the insistence of the army. Saul's curse upon his son hangs over the following chapters of the book, chapters which also detail the rise to prominence of Saul's successor, David. As next in line to the throne, we expect Jonathan to treat David as a rival, but instead, immediately after David slays Goliath, we read:

> Jonathan became one in spirit with David… And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

After David's military successes arouse Saul's jealousy, he finds himself obliged to flee the king's presence. Jonathan then acts as David's defender before his father, Saul, after which David is able to return to court. Here, at the beginning of chapter 20, David has again been forced into hiding, but nonetheless seeks out Jonathan in another attempt to gain his protection. Given that Saul has now made three attempts on David's life, Jonathan's response to David's request is somewhat surprising: 'Never!' Jonathan replies,

> 'You are not going to die. Look, my father doesn't do anything without letting me know. Why would he hide this from me? It isn't so!'

This is what I think is going on: All of us find ourselves at some time in our lives denying what's obvious to everyone around us simply because we shrink from the pain that acknowledging the truth would entail. And here one suspects that Jonathan is deluding himself simply because he is tired of balancing painfully divided loyalties. He owes obedience to Saul both as a son and a subject, but David he loves as he loves himself.

David tactfully suggests that Saul's failure to inform Jonathan of his plans is motivated less by suspicion of his son, than it is by a desire to avoid causing Jonathan unnecessary suffering. Nonetheless, as he tells Jonathan with perhaps an allusion back to the quick steps that had allowed him to dodge Saul's spear in previous chapters, 'There is only a step between me and death.' The allusion – if that is what it is – works: Jonathan commits himself to sounding out his father.

Because I want to hone in on the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan, at this point I am going to stop trying to capture the movement of the dialogue, and to step back so as to highlight some of its more striking features. The first thing I want to draw attention to is the welter of oaths that David and Jonathan use to assure each other of their continued affection and loyalty for the other. 'As surely as the LORD lives and as you live,' David says to Jonathan in v. 3; 'I swear by the LORD, the God of Israel,' says Jonathan in v. 12, and in v. 42, Jonathan tells David to go in peace, 'for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying 'The Lord is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'

One reaction to the multiplication of oaths might well be cynicism: behind the oath, we may feel, might there not lie the wish to conceal, or perhaps to silence an uneasy conscience? David, after all, is steeling himself for life as an outcast, as Saul's declared enemy; Jonathan's repeated assurances that his father poses no danger to David must have sounded hollow, even to himself; both of these young men are perfectly well aware that at Saul's death, one will inevitably reign over the other.

On the other hand, perhaps the accumulation of oaths has more to do with the heightened emotion of the scene in general: both men feel that a decisive moment in the friendship has dawned. It's a time for restating basic commitments and loyalties in the most forceful way possible, so that such assurances of mutual affection may function as anchors in the coming storm. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews notes, oaths are sworn to 'confirm what is said and to put an end to all argument.' God swears an oath in Psalm 110, according to the same writer, because he 'wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear.' And perhaps something similar is taking place here. There are moments when a crisis in the life of a friend can demand, if not an oath, at least an emphatic declaration, by word or deed, that we're in our friend's corner. Perhaps you need to tell your friend that you'll still be there for them, even though they've decided to walk away from living life as a Christian. Or maybe your friend is grieving, and you book a flight to go and see them, even though you know that the visit will be full of painful silences and conversational blunders as you struggle to find something to say that won't just make things worse. Maybe it's turning up in court when your friend has broken the law.

Jesus not only calls himself our friend; but he shows us his commitment to us in dying for us. Whenever I think that my friendship with him is superficial, then it's helpful to remind myself that Jesus is more committed to me than I could ever fathom. 'Never will I leave you, never will

I forsake you,' is one way the Bible summarises God's basic attitude towards us in Jesus. These are words of life, words to feed on your whole life long, words that in the bleaker moments of a Christian's life carry a special weight as a pledge of Jesus' eternal friendship with us.

The next feature I want to pick up on is quite closely related to the first, and that is the presence of the language of 'covenant'. 'Covenant' is a term with huge emotional resonance in the Bible. In the Ancient Near East, a covenant was a binding agreement made between two parties, which was sealed with oaths and solemnised with sacrifices. It was, insofar as we know it from surviving evidence, primarily a political and legal tool. In the Bible we have evidence of covenants made between individuals and between nations, and they are typically formulated using highly conventional language. In the Old Testament, covenant-making is transferred from the legal and political sphere to the sphere of religion: God himself makes a covenant with his people, Israel, at Mount Sinai, and covenant, with its key elements of promise-making and relational commitment, arguably becomes *the* central religious idea of the Old Testament taken as a whole.

The language of covenant is prominent throughout the material relating to David and Jonathan's friendship. It's there right at the beginning of the relationship, in the passage I cited earlier in v. 3 of chapter 18; it's present later on, too, in v. 18 of chapter 23, but it's particularly prominent in our chapter, chapter 20. In v. 8, David appeals to the covenant made back in chapter 18, when he says:

> 'As for you, show kindness to your servant, for you have brought him into a covenant with you before the Lord. If I am guilty, kill me yourself! Why hand me over to your father?'

David here makes explicit that the covenant the two men have entered upon was initiated by Jonathan, and one in which Jonathan served as the senior partner (which is what one would expect, given that Jonathan must be older, and is heir apparent to the throne). David uses the obligations of that covenant (the religious element of which is stressed here) to override the powerful ties of kinship and fealty which bind Jonathan to his father, Saul. In v. 16 Jonathan reaffirms the initial covenant with David, pledging loyalty to David and calling on the Lord to bring David's enemies into judgement, and then has David reaffirm his oath 'out of love for him.' But the full meaning of what Jonathan is asking David to do only emerges when we appreciate that Hebrew uses the idiom 'to cut a covenant' for what appears in English, more blandly, as 'to make a covenant.' In v. 15 Jonathan has asked David not to cut off (לֹא־תַכְרִת) his

kindness from his family – then in v. 16 proceeds to cut (וַיִּכְרֹת) a covenant with the house of David, all of which must have seemed deeply poignant to the first readers of 1 and 2 Samuel, who no doubt knew of the bitter civil war fought between David and Saul's descendants after Jonathan and Saul's deaths.

For many of us, I think, the prominence of covenant language, with its accent on formal promise-making and the spelling out of just what a particular relationship entails in terms of duties and privileges, is going to feel basically antithetical to the spirit of friendship, at least as we conceive it. For us, at least ideally, friendship is all about freedom. Marriage and parenthood and business partnerships entail legal responsibilities; friendships don't. You don't get to choose your family, but you do get to choose your friends.

And yet. I've said that the Old Testament knows about covenants between nations and covenants between individuals. It would be wonderful to know whether the covenant between friends which David and Jonathan entered into was a common or relatively rare phenomenon, but the reality of the evidence we have means that that's a question we just can't answer. Thinking about the first Christians, it's striking that, apart from, say, Jesus' comments about friendship in John's Gospel, the New Testament has relatively little to say about friendship. The first Christians thought of themselves not as friends but as siblings, which is amongst other things a way of capturing the first Christians' sense that becoming Christian was not something they had chosen for themselves, but which they had arrived at as a result of God's will. You choose your friends, but you don't get to choose your brothers and sisters. The absence of friendship in New Testament writing is even more striking when put into the contemporary status of friendship in Greco-Roman culture and philosophy, where it was often thought more significant than, for example, marriage. In fact, Christian writing on friendship really only blossomed with the appropriation of Greco-Roman writers that took place in the fourth century, at the same time, not insignificantly, as monasticism began to assert itself as one of the distinctive ways of being a Christian.

We live in a time in which Christian writers generally have a lot to say about marriage, but in which fewer and fewer people actually get married; a time in which adults often live in share houses or on their own; a time in which frequent moves for work and technological advances provide fresh opportunities and challenges for friendships. We also live in a culture that is increasingly articulate about its loneliness, both inside and outside marriages. And so it's worth asking: Is the covenant-making practice of David and Jonathan, rather than being a sign of formalism and inauthenticity in a friendship, actually a sign of strength, and something that could

be of value in our culture, characterised as it is by a rise in the importance of friendships and in the corresponding threat of loneliness?

One way that longer-term friendships in our culture tend to embed themselves in more formalised ways is through the relationships that develop between you and your friends' children. My Mum's best friend, for example, is known to me and my sister as Aunty Bindy. Aunty Bindy, as far as we're concerned, is family. She was present at every single one of my birthdays as I was growing up; she came to my school concerts; we were often guests in each other's houses. And my guess is that many of you here either are an Aunty Bindy or have one in your lives. Weaving our friendships into the parallel structure of our family relationships is one, quite organic, way of 'covenanting' friendship. Another way of formalising friendships has to do with how friends get incorporated into the big moments of your life, and even your death. As an example, I remember when Cynthia, a friend at church, died a few years ago. Her nephew, Stephen, when planning the funeral service, deliberately asked friends from different spheres of Cynthia's life to put together eulogies to honour her, and his reasoning for this was that friends had been such vital part of her life, and the result was actually very moving.

The night before Jesus died he invited his friends to share in the Passover meal with him, radically reinterpreting it so as to formalise his relationship with his friends in a way they could draw on over the years to come so as to sustain them in their faith until the end. When they drank wine together, he said, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.' According to Jesus, his death for us formalises our relationship with him, and every time we take communion we remember that our relationship with Jesus isn't based on how spiritual we might be feeling at that particular moment, or on our religious performance over the past week, but on his death for us and the eternal love that stands behind that event. Jesus has cut a covenant with us: a lasting, living testament that sets out with perfect clarity just how much he loves us.

The third, and last, thing I want to pick up on in today's passage is its emphasis on physical affection as an ingredient in friendship. In v. 41, David, having heard in code what is effectively his own death sentence, comes out into the open and approaches Jonathan. He bows down three times before Jonathan with his face to the ground; they kiss each other, they weep together. The scene powerfully reminds me of two of the reconciliation scenes described in Genesis: the first, between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33; the second, between Joseph and his brothers, in Genesis 45. It's a scene full of high emotion; in which the contrast between current danger and momentary solidarity and affection stands out.

Touch is difficult thing to speak about with precision, because what feels appropriate in one culture can be interpreted quite differently in another. And this is strikingly illustrated in the case of 1 Samuel 20 by the persistent minority of modern interpreters who see in David and Jonathan's exchange a homoerotic element. But even within the one culture, what one person craves another finds oppressive. And I don't really have any advice for you, except to say that love will generally be able to find a way to work out what amount of physical affection different friends need.

What I *do* want to draw attention to, however, is the cumulative effect of all those times in the Gospels when the author draws attention to how Jesus touched others, and submitted to their touch. He is willing to touch and be touched by what his contemporaries thought repulsive: the leper in Mark 1; the woman subject to bleeding in Mark 5; the sinful woman in Luke 7. Jesus is willing to touch people no one else will. Sometimes we do things that make us ashamed to look at ourselves in the mirror; things that make our flesh crawl; things that make us feel soiled. Jesus' friendship is stronger than sin, stronger than shame, stronger than dirt. Let's pray:

Father, thank you for your deep, deep love for us. Thank for your loving-kindness, your faithfulness, your everlasting friendship with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.