

All Saints Weston Talk 10th September 2023

Pippa Page - 'Journey with a soul friend'

Good morning, everybody. So what's going on in this very short book of the Bible? We've got a letter from the elder who is John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, brother of James, he doesn't seem to like his name because he's never referred to himself as John. And he's often called the Apostle of love. And he has a very characteristic, loving style of writing. He's very encouraging. And when he does need to rebuke people, he does it in a loving sort of way.

This letter is written to Gaius of whom very little is known apart from what we read here. Gaius is generally assumed to be a church leader, somewhere in what was then Asia and is now Turkey. Although we're not actually told that, and some of the commentators think that he might have actually been a member of the church which was led by Diotrephes.

The point is, he'd come to know the Lord through the preaching of John. So John had a special relationship with him and loved him dearly. John commends him for his faithfulness to the truth, and for the fact that he's living it out in his everyday life. And he encourages him to continue in his support of the missionaries that John had sent out whom Gaius had welcomed and given hospitality.

It was quite usual in the time of the early church for travelling missionaries, to be sent out to support the new young churches, and also to make more new disciples. Most of them would not be able to afford to stay in an inn. And actually, most of the inns have terrible reputations, so they wouldn't really want to. So they relied on the hospitality of Christians, in a similar way to when Jesus sent out the 12 and the 72. These missionaries, though, would not accept help from non-Christians, and depended solely on the support and hospitality of the members of the churches.

It appears that Diotrephes had some difficulty with accepting the ministry of these missionaries. And also with accepting the authority of John who sent them out. Perhaps as an established church leader, he felt that they were interfering in his ministry. Perhaps he resented the Apostles still mentoring their children, or the people that they brought to faith, who were now members of his congregation. John says that he had written to the church but that Diotrephes had chosen not to share the letter. And as the letter no longer exists, it's quite possible that Diotrephes destroyed it.

So not only was Diotrephes not helping the visiting missionaries himself, he was trying to stop other people from doing so and actually throwing out of the church those people who did. So John is writing to Gaius to commend his actions so far, and to warn him that there may be trouble ahead. And to be careful, whose example and advice he follows.

Demetrius, who's also mentioned that the end of the letter is assumed to be the person who's carrying it. How lovely to be described as someone who everyone speaks well of. In

the Message Bible version, it says, everyone has a good word for Demetrius. The truth itself stands up for Demetrius. He must have been quite a chap mustn't he?

So what can we learn from this? The first thing that I noticed was that John commended Gaius for the way that he was living out his faith. You see, it's not enough just to know about God, or even to know God in a deep and intimate and personal way. We need to be living out our faith in the way we do our work, doing it to the best of our ability, not falling into temptations along the way, loving our neighbours in an active way, serving in the church and in the community with love and care. And always being ready to give an answer, when we are asked to give the reason for the hope that we have with gentleness and respect, as it says in 1 Peter 3 verse 15.

Many of you are familiar with Lectio 365. And this week on Thursday, Pete Gregg quoted St. Augustine. And when he said, no man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbour. Nor has any man the right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God. Now, I think that maybe some of us do struggle to find the space for sufficient contemplation of God. But maybe also, some of us need to be encouraged to make sure that we are making enough effort with service due to our neighbour, which is also part of our life of service to God. Are we living out our faith?

But the connection with this morning's theme of the service, which is soul friends, is this. John is an example of a soul friend to Gaius. And as you know, we're in a sermon series called 'followers of the way', looking at early Celtic Christian discipleship and seeing what we can learn from it. So let's have a look and think about what it means, how it works and whether it's necessary.

The Christian life is not a solo effort. It was never meant to be. When we're baptised, we're baptised into the community of the church. In the baptism service, the minister says this 'may God who has received you by baptism into his church, pour upon you the riches of His grace. That with the company of Christ's pilgrim people, you may daily be renewed by his anointing spirit and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory'. There is a reason why we're in community. Life is difficult. And we need the support of each other, to lead the best life for Jesus that we can. In theory, you can live your life as a Christian on your own, without being part of a church. In practice, though, if you are loving God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbour as yourself, you need the support of other people, and they need your support. We need help with things like dealing with difficult situations, help with making sure that we are actually on the right track. Help with encouraging us to keep on going and encouraging us that we are doing well. Help with listening to and discerning God's voice and having people to pray with and for us.

Ideally, all of us would benefit from being in a small group where we can get to know each other better, and talk about how life is going and support one another in prayer. However,

not everybody is able to get to a small group meeting. And depending on who else is in the group, it's not always easy to share our innermost feelings in a group situation. Prayer triplets are a great way of supporting and praying for each other as well as praying for the needs of others. But not everybody's in one of those either. Perhaps that's something that we need to review and revive as a church.

And then we come to soul friends. In Simon Reed's book 'Followers of the Way' he says that the Celtic and desert Christians regarded it as essential to have a soul friend. Their definition of a soul friend is this. A soul friend, is a mature Christian, who is in sympathy with our way of life. And who helps us to discern and respond appropriately to God's will. To grow in maturity, responsibility and wholeness. And to deepen our relationship with God. Our soul friend helps us to work out our personal application of the way of life, reviews it with us at regular intervals, and is a companion to us on our spiritual journey.

If we're honest, for most of us, the idea of being accountable to someone else is not a very attractive one. But if we think of this more in terms of someone, we could meet up with every few months, for an hour or so solely to listen to us, to encourage us and to pray for us, then it doesn't sound so bad, does it? That's what Simon Reed says that soul friends are about.

So how do we find such a person? In the book, he quotes a chap called Ray Simpson who has written books on soul friendship, and who provides a checklist to help people get started. He suggests that we start by thinking about and maybe writing down what help we would want from a soul friend. And this might include help with praying and listening to God. Help with working out or applying a way of life. Help with spiritual growth and understanding. Help with processing our emotions and inner life, and help with important decisions. Then we need to consider the four basic skills of a soul friend. Now, the more astute of you might notice that I've got five things on here, not four. That's because Ray Simpson says that keeping confidences goes without saying. But I don't think it does go without saying I think we need to say it. So I've put that on as well. So ability to keep confidences, listening skills, reflectiveness, prayerfulness and dedication to trying to walk closely with God. And then we also need to think about what sort of person ideally, we would want our soul friend to be. And these are not rights and wrongs, and should be or shouldn't be. These are what would fit personally for us because we're all different. So would it be appropriate for them to be male or female? Would it be appropriate for them to be older than we are? An ordained minister, a member of a religious community, rooted in a particular Christian tradition, maybe a trained spiritual director, someone who's able to be contacted outside of scheduled meetings, someone available by phone, email, and/or online chat. Formal or informal in style. And then he says, we need to make a list of all the people we know that fulfil all those criteria. It's not going to be very long is it? And I should warn you that we can't all go and queue up at the rectory door.

Simon Reed also says, I don't know if you agree with this. It's best not to have your marital partner as your soul friend. Apart from anything else, you might want to talk about them. And also not to be soul friends for each other in a sort of bilateral arrangement. Or if you do, you need to have separate meetings for talking and for listening, because otherwise, you're not really listening 100% to the person and to God, you're thinking what shall I say next or what I should have said. I think that that's a good point, actually. But I think we could work around it.

Now, if you're a bit dubious about Celtic Christianity, and think that maybe this is for other people. Let's hear from John Wesley. John Wesley coined the phrase 'twin souls' to describe two mature spiritual friends who meet with each other regularly as equals, giving each other support, accountability, discerning insight, concerned counsel and love, as they serve as God's Usher to one another. God's Usher is another term that Wesley used for the ministry of faith mentors and spiritual friends. They usher the one they serve into the presence of God, and they usher their friends along the paths that lead to life. Wesley believed that all Christians need the support of spiritual friendship and guidance.

We know a lot about what he thought by what he wrote in his letters to someone called Francis Godfrey, he wrote, it's a blessing thing to have fellow travellers to the New Jerusalem. If you do not find any, you must make them for none can travel this road alone. And to Ebenezer Blackwell, a wealthy banker, he wrote, I am fully persuaded that if you had always one or two faithful friends near you who could speak the very truth from their heart, and watch over you in love, you would swiftly advance. George Whitfield, who was a contemporary and friend of John Wesley, and who actually preached to more huge crowds than Wesley did, looked back over his own career with sadness. And he said, Brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry, he joined in class, and thus preserve the fruits of his labour. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand. In other words, Wesley insisted on teaching in small groups, and in mentoring new Christians. And Whitfield didn't. A rope of sand is not very strong is it?

In the New Testament, we can see that Jesus taught people individually, as well as in crowds. He invested time in them, not just the 12 Apostles, but also the Samaritan woman in John 4, Mary and Martha just before Lazarus was raised in John 11, the rich young ruler in Mark 10, and no doubt lots of other people that we don't know about. And there are numerous examples of Paul mentoring and teaching individuals too. In one Thessalonians chapter two, verse seven, it says, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you live a life worthy of God who calls you. And of course, there's John and Gaius.

In the book of Job in the Old Testament, we can see an excellent example of how not to do soul friendship. Job's friends started really well. They sat with him for seven days and said nothing. That was good. But once they started talking, they got it seriously wrong. They didn't listen to Job and they didn't listen to God. They tried to argue him out of his despair,

imposing their own preconceived ideas, and even blaming him for his own misfortunes. It is important to choose the right soul friend, and to agree at the start, that if either person feels that the relationship isn't right or has run its course, it can be stopped without any offence being taken. Remember, John's warning to Gaius, be careful whose advice and example you follow.

So what we can see from all this is that new Christians need teaching and mentoring, there is absolutely no doubt about this. And goodness knows how many people have been lost because they haven't had enough support in the early stages of their Christian journey. But all of us need support from other people all the way along, whether it's in a home group, or another sort of small group, a prayer triplets, a one to one soul friendship, or spiritual direction. Spiritual directors are like soul friends, only more formal, and they've had training so they do it properly. The trouble is, there aren't anywhere near enough of them to go round.

Now, if you're not in any of these support situations, do have a think about how you can get support. It's important that we all get support from somewhere. In this series on Simon Reed's followers of the way, we're going to be looking at 10 waymarks, of which soul friends are the second one. And then three life giving principles. And it's a lot of new things to take on board. In the book, he suggests that we don't try and start on all of them at the same time. But I would add equally, let's not do nothing. Making sure that we have some spiritual support is a very good place to start. Because we never know when life is going to get difficult, do we?

Should we pray? Father God, we need your wisdom. Father, would you pour out Your Spirit on us now. Would you show us if we need to get some support from somewhere or someone? And would you guide us to the person or people we need to get support from. Father, we know that most of all, we need support from you. So we ask that you'll fill each one of us afresh with your spirit this morning. And Lord that you'll help us to take a step closer to you today. Father, we want to be your people we want to walk in your ways. And we want to grow nearer to the sort of people you want us to be. Help us to be willing to change. To change for you into what you want us to be. Father, come and minister to us now. Show us what you want to do in our lives. Because we ask it in the mighty name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.