

'YE ARE MY FRIENDS' by John Macmurray

Ye are my friends, if you do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants but friends. These things I command you that ye love one another.
John xv. 1-17.

THE purpose of God in the life of the world is a web of purposes which has a single centre, from which all the threads go out and to which they all return. Only from the centre can we begin to trace the plan of it. From any other point it will seem a meaningless tangle.

Copernicus made a revolution in human knowledge merely by shifting the centre of the solar system from the earth to the sun. The world-revolution of the Christians came when Jesus discovered the true centre of human life.

'Not servants but friends' is the proclamation of the revolution. The keyword of the Christian gospel is not service but friendship. Of late, I believe, we have been thinking too much in terms of service—service of God and of the world.

There is nothing distinctively Christian about that. It is the natural way of religious thought when it becomes practical. Socrates called himself the servant of Apollo. Christ's revolution consisted, like that of Copernicus, precisely in denying the 'Natural' point of view and substituting friendship for service.

'But surely,' you will say, 'we are called as Christians to serve Christ and to serve the world.' No, we are called to be the friends of Christ and the friends of men. That is not at all the same thing. Friendship often looks like service from the outside. So long as we stand on the earth, the earth going round the sun will look like the sun going round the earth. But when we take our stand at the centre of life with Jesus, the whole landscape is altered and service is swallowed up in friendship.

There is only one way to get the difference between service and friendship clear, and that is by discovering it in our own experience. No one can do that for us. But I can perhaps suggest certain lines which you may follow in exploring your own experience. In the first place, then, the standpoint of service is bound up with the idea of duty, and in friendship duty disappears. Duty, in fact, fades right out of the picture in the Christian point of life. Suppose a friend came to see you when you were ill, would you be satisfied to know he came because it was his duty to come? Would you not rather feel that the one thing needful was lacking? In friendship the personal things—warmth and intimacy of feeling—must be the springs of action.

The cold impersonality of obligation is unprofitable. We shall not then be surprised by the quaintness of Christ's treatment of the idea of duty. 'So likewise ye, when ye have done all those things which are commanded you, say "We unprofitable servants: we have only done that which it was our duty"'. Only our whole duty and Jesus calls that unprofitable service. It is just because his view of life begins where duty ends; because Christian relationships are all intimate personal relationships. To fall short of that is to miss the one thing needful.

Self-sacrifice is another idea which clings about the thought of service but has no real place in Christ's view of life. He loved life and hated death. He thought that self sacrifice was necessary sometimes, never that it was good. He said that the way to save your life was to lose it, never that there could be any value in losing it. There, indeed, lies the precise difference between Christianity and Buddhism. There have been martyrs who embraced death for their cause with joy. Jesus was not one of them. It was with a desperate resolution that he 'set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem'. In Gethsemane he fell on his face and prayed, saying 'O my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me'. As he died, he cried 'My God, why has thou forsaken me?'

It was Jesus who said 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' He was the great lover of life. It was Jesus not Nietzsche who said, 'I am come that ye might have life, and that ye might have it more abundantly.' He suffered and died, not to teach us to suffer and to die, but that we might live. He sacrificed himself, not to teach us to sacrifice ourselves, but to make 'one sacrifice for sins once for all,' and the writer to the Hebrews goes on to draw the obvious conclusion. 'There remaineth therefore now no more sacrifice for sins for ever.' Our own experience of friendship and perhaps that alone can throw a light into these depths. The more deep and real our friendships become, the more what looks like sacrifice from outside is found to be the free and spontaneous expression of our own soul's necessity. If you discovered that a picture you had bought for an old song in a country curio shop was a priceless old Master it would be ludicrous to say you had *sacrificed* five shillings for it. In a perfect friendship, however, the word sacrifice is not merely ludicrous, it is just meaningless. In such a relationship what looks like giving what I value most is really getting what I most desire: the losing is the saving.

The fact is that in friendship we are beyond law and obedience, beyond rules and commandments, beyond all constraint, in a world of freedom. But did not Jesus say, 'Ye are my friends IF ye do whatsoever I command you'? Yes, he did. *We*, on our side, are apt to miss the quiet humour of his paradoxes. 'These are my commandments,' he goes on, 'that ye love one another.' In other words, the friendship of Christ is realized in our friendships with one another. His command is that we

rise above commandments, and therefore his obedience is perfect freedom. Make service your centre, with its laws and duties and self-sacrifice, and life is a bondage. Make friendship the centre and life is freedom.

We are here at the heart of the Christian revolution. Christianity is the religion of friendship. The measure of our Christianity is the reality and depth of our friendship with men and women. Neither knowledge nor beauty nor goodness can save or satisfy a single soul. Only friendship can do it. Friendship is the supreme value in life and the source of all other values. The others are only moons that reflect the light of friendship. If their sun is darkened, they, too, will disappear in the blackness that covers the world.

Do you think that is too simple and easy? Simple it is, perhaps, but not easy. There is nothing we fear more than friendship, nothing that strikes more terror into us than freedom. If this seems a strange saying, it must be because you are confusing friendship with friendliness. Friendliness is not to be despised, but it is only the imitation of a friendship and a poor substitute for the real thing. It is really a refined form of service, and often rather a superficial one. But friendship knows no reservations, it gives not sympathy or comfort, or advice to help, but rather itself. To be a friend is to be yourself for another person. It means committing yourself completely and revealing yourself without reserve. It means putting all your cards on the table and taking the consequences. It means stark reality between persons without pretence and sentimentality. How many of us could bear to be found out completely for what we are by someone else? Most of us shrink from finding ourselves out. Even with our intimates we wear a mask and insist upon their wearing one. We have tastes and decencies and dignities that we must defend, and all of them are defences against friendship. They are the life-belts that keep us on the surface of that sea of intimate relations, and we cling to them in terror of drowning in the limitless depths of personality. So pretence creeps in and sentimentality, the grossest sin of all against friendship. Honest hatred is better than the pretence to love. There are amongst us those who are willing to spend time and thought and strength and money in the service of others in order to retain the isolation of our own personality, to conceal as it were the fraud we are guilty of in refusing to give ourselves. All that service is of no avail. What men need from us is love, not moving acts; friendship, not friendly services. 'Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not friendship, it profiteth me nothing'--just nothing. Friendship means losing ourselves, and that is apt to be a terrifying experience.

It is to this dedication of themselves to friendship that the followers of Christ are called. Those who have the courage to lose themselves

discover with an ever-recurring surprise that in losing themselves they find themselves, and freedom. All of us know something of the freedom that comes—the tranquility and self-realization that comes when we slip from the company of strangers into the companionship of our intimate friends. Some restraint that caged us up inside ourselves is removed. We have no longer to keep up appearances. Our real selves can flow out to those others freely, and in giving ourselves we find ourselves. The ray that illuminates and warms us in these moments, however faint it may be, comes straight from the Light of the World. The purpose of God in the life of the world is simply the spreading and deepening of that experience until it covers the whole world.

The praise of friendship is not peculiar to Christianity. The uniqueness of Christ's gospel is that it makes friendship the heart of life, the absolute to which all else is relative. The Kingdom of Service is an infinitely distant ideal which calls for the sacrifice of life in the hope of Utopia. But Christ's Kingdom, the kingdom of friendship, is no distant dream that can only come true 'When the war drums throb no longer, and the battle flags are furled', but a present reality. So when the Pharisees asked Him when the kingdom of God should come, Jesus could answer, 'They shall not say, "Lo here!" or "Lo there!" for the Kingdom of God is among you.'

© John Macmurray 1979

This address was first given to the Student Christian Movement Quadrennial Conference in Liverpool in 1929.