**Our Forever Friend**

**Hockliffe Street Baptist Church**

**Sunday 10th February 2019**

**Title Slide**

In our reading, we heard Jesus say to his disciples, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” and he went on to say “I have called you friends”. He said it to his disciples and he says it to us this morning, his disciples, his followers, his friends for whom he laid down his life.

Our theme is the friendship of Jesus and, as you will have seen from the notes sheet, I want to make three simple points about this relationship with Jesus …

**Slide – the three main points**

… it starts with a new relationship, it can be a near relationship and it is a never-ending relationship.

But I’m going to begin by asking that we listen to a song which was the inspiration for the title of this presentation.

**Slide with picture of Charlie Landsborough**

The song is ‘My Forever Friend’. It was written by a country singer from Merseyside named Charlie Landsborough. I’ll tell you more about Charlie after we have heard him sing the song.

**Slides with verses of song**

Everybody needs a little help sometime

No one stands alone

Makes no difference if you're just a child like me

Or a king upon a throne

For there are no exceptions

We all stand in the line

Everybody needs a friend

Let me tell you of mine

He's my forever friend

My leave-me-never friend

From darkest night to rainbow's end

He's my forever friend

Even when I turn away He cares for me

His love no one can shake

Even as I walk away He's by my side

With every breath I take

And sometimes I forget Him

My halo fails to shine

Sometimes I'm not His friend

But He is always mine

He's my forever friend

My leave-me-never friend

From darkest night to rainbow's end

He's my forever friend

If you still don't know the one I'm talking of

I think it's time you knew

Long ago and far away upon a cross

My friend died for you

So if you'd like to meet Him

And don't know what to do

Ask my friend into your heart

And He'll be your friend too

He's my forever friend

My leave-me-never friend

From darkest night to rainbow's end

He's my forever friend

**Slide with picture of Charlie Landsborough**

Country may not be everyone’s kind of music but I hope the words of the song may find an echo in your heart.

Charlie Landsborough wrote this and some other songs for his pupils when he was a school-teacher. (A good thing to do, Martin Smith?!) But before that, after his mother died of cancer when he was 12, he fell into a life of petty crime and spent a short time in prison. After some years, he came to realise that his life was empty and remembered his joy at hearing the gospel from a teacher when he was in primary school. He had abandoned his faith in the face of the ridicule of his friends calling him a Holy Joe. He decided to go from church to church in his town until he met a “kind, highly academic” Christian who, after a number of discussions, led him to commit himself to Jesus as his Saviour and Friend.

And, Hazel Davis, you and your husband Paul first met Charlie shortly after this, didn’t you?! Paul had plans to write Charlie’s biography but sadly didn’t get to do that before he passed away.

**Slide – the three main points**

So we’re thinking about friendship this morning.

What do you think about when you hear words like ‘friend’ and ‘friendship’? A person whom you regard as your best friend? A person whom you would love to have as a friend? Someone who was once a friend but they let you down? Someone who has died who was such a good friend to you? A sense of being on the outside of a circle of friends? A feeling of being alone without friends? Alone in a crowd?

Perhaps you are thinking of all those who you have in your list of Facebook friends? How many are acquaintances rather than friends … or certainly not close friends?

We are the most connected people ever but we are also struggling with loneliness! In her book ‘Alone Together’, Sherry Turkle writes …

**Slide with book cover and Sherry Turkle quotations**

“We are lonely but fearful of intimacy.

Digital connections may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.

Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.”

I should add that Sherry Turkle says she is not anti-technology, she is pro-conversation.

It is recorded in the story of Creation that God said that it is not good for us to be alone. We are made for one another, for relationships with one another … and with him, for conversations with one another and with him!

Jesus said in our Bible reading, “I have called you friends”! “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” So let’s think about the friendship of Jesus. It starts as a new relationship.

**Slide with first main point in bold**

I was seventeen, going on eighteen. I was sitting in a Sunday evening service in the YMCA in Dublin. It was a service to which young people came from all over Dublin. The meeting hall was a bit like this, perhaps a bit larger, with a gallery at the back but not along the sides. I was sitting with two friends high in the gallery.

I had always believed in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I had always believed that Jesus came as baby, lived and died on the cross and was raised again. I had always regarded the Bible as God’s Word and read it regularly. I had always gone to church. I had always prayed to God. But, at that time, I was struggling with the realisation that, in spite of all that, all was not well in my heart and life, that there were things that I had done, said and thought that were not good. They were bad but I wanted to hold on to them.

That evening, sitting there in that service, while a pastor from Liverpool was speaking, I surrendered to the Lord and accepted him as Saviour and Friend. I was changed and my life was changed. It wasn’t just a change of mind, a change of beliefs that I had.

I was walking on air as my friends and I walked the mile and a half or so to where we and other young men fresh up in Dublin from the country were living. I immediately wrote a letter home to my parents and younger brothers on the farm to tell them that Jesus was my Saviour.

That was on 11th February 1962, 57 years ago, so tomorrow is my 57th birthday! Happy birthday to me!

How to describe the newness of this new relationship? It is having a new person come into one’s life. It changes everything.

The grime artist Stormzy talks about …

**Slide with picture of Stormzy and extract from his song**

… being blinded by his grace. “I’m blinded by your grace … through the darkness you came.”

The writer C S Lewis came to trust the Lord while he was travelling with his brother from Oxford to Whipsnade Zoo for a picnic. His brother was riding a motorbike and he was in a sidecar.

**Slide with picture of Lewis book cover and quotation**

Lewis writes, “It was like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.”

That’s another way of thinking about the newness of this relationship with Jesus.

I’ve come to think of it as being a reorientation, a reorientation of the whole person.

**Slide – picture of sun shining on beach**

Back in May 2016, I had a work-trip to Australia and I made what was to me a surprising discovery. The sun shone from the northern sky! I was standing by a street in central Sydney and someone was directing me to the Sydney Opera House. He pointed down the street and said, “keep going south and you can’t miss it”. But the sun was shining from behind us and I thought, “That can’t be south … that must be north”. Of course, it was south because the sun of which I was somehow aware without thinking about it was shining down on me from the northern sky.

Again, a day or two later, one of my hosts had taken me to the rail station to catch a train into central Sydney and it happened again. She indicated the direction from which the train would be coming and I thought, “Surely not, it will be coming from the east”. East and west were swapped around in my mind because, again, I was thinking the sun was shining from the south … and it wasn’t!

Having this new friend, Jesus, coming into one’s heart and life is like that. It is a reorientation from having my world centred on me to having it centred on him. It is not that I’m consciously thinking of him all the time any more than I am consciously thinking of the sun as being in the southern sky but my living and my decisions and plans now take him into account. A husband is not consciously thinking of his wife every moment of the day but all his living and all his plans and decisions are within that relationship and oriented towards it.

I hope this makes sense.

We come now to the second point (and I should say that I will talk more briefly about this and the third point).

**Slide with second main point in bold**

The friendship of Jesus is or can be a near relationship. Charlie Landsborough sings of him as his “leave-me-never friend”. Jesus said before he left his disciples to return to the Father, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” or, as it is translated in The Message, “I’ll be with you, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age” (the last words of Matthew’s Gospel). This is especially true when we meet together for he said, “when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there” (Matthew 18:20).

Think of it – I am with you, I am there beside you. How can he be with me and with you and with people all over the world at the same time?! He says, ‘I have called you friends’ and ‘I will be with you, day after day after day’! Proverbs 18:24 says “there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother”.

He knows us, he knows us better than our closest friends or family know us. Val knows me, we’ve been married for over 50 years so she knows me very well indeed but Jesus knows me more truly than even Val does. He knows me better than I know myself because I can have lots of illusions about myself.

Even though he knows us so well and knows the things that others don’t know, he loves us, he loves you and me! Our Bible passage is all about love and the word used in it for ‘friend’ has its root in the Greek word for love – ‘philos’. (‘Philosophy’ means ‘love of wisdom’, ‘bibliophile’ means ‘lover of books’, ‘Philadelphia’ means ‘brotherly love’.) Jesus is saying he is not just acquainted with us as we may be with many of our Facebook friends – there are other words in the New Testament for that kind of friend – we are his loved friends!

And because he loves us, he is straight with us. Our best friends are those who are prepared to be frank with us but lovingly so. He is that kind of loving friend. He doesn’t flatter us, he tells it like it is!

We need to listen for what he is telling us. It would be a strange friendship if one person did all the talking but I fear that we often tend to talk to Jesus more than listen to him.

When we speak to him, we should be honest. This may mean, as in many of the Old Testament Psalms, we can ask ‘Why, Lord?’!

There are times too just to be silent together. Old friends don’t have to be talking all the time – they may walk together in silence for a time, just being together.

On his part, it is always a near relationship. On our part, it may not be. As Charlie Landsborough sang,

Even when I turn away He cares for me

His love no one can shake

Even as I walk away He's by my side

With every breath I take

And sometimes I forget Him

My halo fails to shine

Sometimes I'm not His friend

But He is always mine

My halo often fails to shine, oh so often! Looking back on these 57 years of walking with him, there are many things that I regret. Not the general course of my life, not the big things, the major decisions, the people and places he has taken me to! But there are many things I’ve said and done, many ways I have hurt others, many times I’ve not been loving. Jesus says in our reading, “You are my friends if you do what I command. … This is my command: Love each other.” I trust him for his forgiveness and pray that he will make me ever more loving, loving him and loving others.

He is our leave-me-never friend. Friendship with Jesus is a near relationship. It is also a never-ending relationship and this brings up to our third and last point.

**Slide with third main point in bold**

Folks, I’m a little boy on the inside but a look in a mirror tells me that I am a long way on from being a little boy! I’m on the other side of seventy. I don’t know how long I’ve still got in this life, how many years or even how many days. But I believe that, when that day comes and I leave this present world, I will go to be with Jesus where he is and that I’ll have a new body and a new life in a new heavens and new earth when he makes everything new.

Job, the Old Testament prophet who suffered so much in his life, was able to say, “I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he shall stand upon the earth”. As an old man nearing death, Paul in his second letter to young Timothy wrote this: “I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I’ve committed unto him against that day”.

There’s an old hymn which has those words of Paul’s as a chorus. One verse goes like this:

**Slide – verse of old hymn**

I know not what of good or ill

 May be reserved for me,

Of weary ways or golden days,

 Before His face I see.

**Slide – chorus of old hymn**

But “I know Whom I have believed

And am persuaded that He is able

To keep that which I’ve committed

 Unto Him against that day.”

How do you know, John? How can you be sure?

There are many things that I don’t know. There are many things that I don’t understand.

But I am sure that the greatest thing there is in this dark world is love. There is so much hatred in our world, so much cruelty, so much selfishness, so much greed. There was a Christian named Praying John Hyde who was once observed leaning on a lamp-post in a New York street and calling out to God, “Lord, the sin of this city is breaking my heart”.

And yet in all this darkness and hatred, there is love, self-giving love. Where does it come from? Surely it can only come from the Lord. And the whole Bible bears witness to this!

Look again at our Bible passage …

**Slide – John 15:9-17 with ‘love’ and ‘friend’ highlighted**

As the Father has **love**d me, so have I **love**d you. Now remain in my **love**. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my **love**, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his **love**. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: **Love** each other as I have **love**d you. Greater **love** has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: **Love** each other.

Nine times in these nine verses, Jesus talks about love and the word used has its root in ‘agape’, the Greek word for self-giving love. It is all about love, it is all about giving oneself for others, loving others as we love ourselves.

I’m finishing with two verses from I Corinthians 13, that great chapter about love.

As I’ve said, there are many things I don’t know, many things I don’t understand but I am sure that the greatest thing is love and love has its source in the Lord who is our forever friend. Hear what Paul says.

**Slide – I Corinthians 13:12-13**

We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We’ll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love. (1 Corinthians 13:12-13, *The Message*)

**Slide – Two book covers**

As I close, just a quick mention of two books. Vaughan Roberts’ book ‘True Friendship’ was recommended to me by Pete – a very helpful book. Paul Davis wrote the biography of another Christian country singer – George Hamilton IV from the USA who had late evening series on BBC TV and once led a Christmas concert here in this church. There’s a copy in the lending library off the hall.

Let’s pray together.