

## **SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP:**

Some Thoughts for Reflection for Retreat Day Saturday, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2010  
At Desert Creek House, 802 Desert Creek Road, Numbugga via Bega NSW 2550

Our proposing regular get-togethers with followers of Christ, had from the beginning been inspired by the idea of being *truly present to each other* during the time we share together. This presence in dialogue is non-verbal and non-conceptual. This might sound vague, but it is nevertheless a hard fact. It is difficult to describe but easy to experience: it is to be open and fully present to the other/s. Words by themselves cannot ensure successful sharing or dialogue, if this mutual presence is not there. This presence is human, ordinary, affectionate, friendly and trusting. It is not merely an emotional element, but it is the practice of an open heart: the human being's innate qualities of compassion and tolerance for each other.

Another pre-condition for deep sharing seems to be the readiness to be real friends. We have found some rich thoughts in a book called "*The Good Heart*" which arose out of the John Main Seminar of 1994 (John Main reintroduced contemplative Prayer into the Christian world through the International Society of Christian Meditation) which has inspired Christian people around the world, including the group that meets in Tathra every Monday night. At that seminar, a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Christian practitioners was established. Dom Lawrence Freeman, OSB wrote beautifully on the need for Spiritual Friendship in the practice of our faith. Some extracts follow. Please read them with an open Mind and Heart and listen to your own deepest promptings and responses.

1. "Friendship occupies a central place in Christian thought and tradition. The Christian ideal of friendship is built upon a long classical Western tradition that did not understand friendship, as we often do today, as a diluted form of intimacy. Cicero or St. Augustine would not have understood modern journalists who say that a couple are "just friends" as if the only really interesting relationship is that which progresses "further" than friendship. For them and for many of their preceding and succeeding generations, friendship was the goal of all the formative experiences of human relationships. Education in the widest sense was a preparation for the achievement of friendship which allowed one to share the deepest and truest part of oneself with another.
2. "St. Aelred of Rievaulx, a 13<sup>th</sup> C. Yorkshire monk, wrote a treatise called "*Spiritual Friendship*" which focused on the Christian understanding of the classical ideal of friendship. He speaks of the disciplined preparation and mutual testing that precedes the full flowering of friendship, when the sweetness of trust and confidence, intimacy and openness between the friends flows out through the friendship to the world around them. Significantly, he says such friendship cannot be based on anything less than the essential goodness of each friend. There cannot be friendship based on exploitative desire or hatred of others because these negative qualities betray human nature. St Aelred describes without embarrassment instances of friendship in his own life and the joy he feels 'when he walks around his cloister knowing that there is none there whom he does not love and none whom he does not feel loved by.' For him, the perfection of human friendship is an epiphany of the real presence of Christ. Christ, he says, makes the *third* between us. In this Christian vision, all true friendship will "begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ". It is a beautiful and profound understanding of the humanity of the Risen Jesus.

3. “Christ does not, in this view of human nature, represent an obstacle or intellectual barrier separating us from others. He is not some *thing* we speak about and dissect. He is the *unobtrusive presence in which we become really present to one another*. He can be named, or he can remain unnamed; in either case his reality is neither increased nor diminished. Theologically, too, the idea of friendship is also central to Christian faith. Speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus declared himself to be their friend: ‘I call you servants no longer. A servant does not know what his master is about. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father.’ (John 15:15)
4. “The Holy Spirit, which flows into the realm of human consciousness from the glorified Body of Jesus, is also described in the images of friendship. She is an advocate, someone *on our side*, to remind us of that which we have forgotten, to repair the ravages of our mindlessness. What is so powerful about this ideal of friendship is the way it can reconcile the absolute and the personal. You can disagree about the choice of carpet colour and remain friends. A Buddhist can be friends with a Christian without either trying to convert the other. In friendship differences can be respected and even enjoyed. In relationships lacking friendship, differences can zoom out of proportion and become ethnic, religious or ideological divisions. We demonize the threatening *other*, project our shadow upon them, and find conflict. Friendship is the supreme expression of compassion and tolerance with a respect for the primacy of truth over all subjective tendencies.
5. “There is a simple test to determine whether one’s pursuit of truth has lost contact with this touchstone of friendship. When we hear on the news that a Catholic person has been shot in Belfast, or an Israeli soldier has died on the West Bank, or so many Chinese baby girls have disappeared from an orphanage, or so many Tibetans have been killed - are we hearing a news item about individual people, or about ethnic or religious groups? Do we perceive the murdered Israeli soldier or Palestinian demonstrator as a Jew or an Arab, or as a human being who happens also to be a Jew or an Arab? How do the figures strike us - as individual tragedies or as statistics that are being used as political weapons?
6. “In this perspective, the warmth of human friendship does not water down the concentration of pure Truth. Truth is not merely the right ideas well expressed. Truth without the human warmth of friendship is a pale shadow of reality.
7. “Christians have now discovered - that “the Church” is a very general term. It can mean many things: a cold building on a Sunday morning; a global religion; a mystical tradition; a spiritual body extended backward and forward in history from the birth of Jesus; or the cultural group I was born into, brought up in, and now have mixed feelings about. Perhaps one cannot entirely separate institutional and spiritual Christianity; any more than one can separate form and content, or body and mind; but it is important to preserve the distinction. There are many examples in history of Christians who have remained outside the institutional church but who knew with the full force of their being that they belonged to the Church.”

(From *The Good Heart*, Rider Books, London; 2002)