

**St. Petri, Hannover-Kleefeld, 17 July 2011,
4th Sunday after H. Trin.
Sermon on John 15:14-16**

Dear friends in Christ:

It was in the midst of Australia in September 2002. Church and village of Hermannsburg in Central Australia celebrated 125 years of existence – or better: the arrival of the first two missionaries from Hermannsburg in Germany. There they laboured for 14 years and laid the foundation to the Lutheran Church in the midst of Australia. Nowadays 2/3 of the Aboriginal population in the Centre belongs to it. The missionaries also laid the foundation to a village which until 1900 was the largest permanent settlement far and wide, before neighbouring Alice Springs – “only” 110 km from Hermannsburg – started to grow.

I was privileged to represent the German Hermannsburg at these celebrations. They lasted – besides an open air-service on Sunday morning – for three nights and consisted mainly of bands and choirs presenting music: soloists and groups singing spiritual and other songs in English and in the languages of the Aboriginal tribes around Hermannsburg: Arranta and four other languages. Much of it in Western Country style – and believe me, sung by most beautiful voices and accompanied by excellent instrumentalists. Have you ever heard Aboriginals singing? Not with didgeridoos for tourists, but the country style so many of them like? Then you know why I was so excited those evenings. They were unforgettable.

But what touched me most was a traditional hymn sung by almost all choirs – in English, and also in at least three Aboriginal languages: “What a friend I have in Jesus...” Yes, tears filled my eyes when hearing it. Because it came from the deep hearts of the singers. You felt it.

What they celebrated these evenings was the fact that strangers had come from afar and had introduced them to this friend. A friend to whom they owed not only enriching spiritual experiences, but also their very physical existence. If the missionaries – originally a blacksmith and a baker - would not have found themselves Jesus to be their friend, they would not have studied for five years in the German Hermannsburg and then accepted a call to Australia. Without knowing that Jesus was with them they would not have undertaken the hardship of a journey of 22 months from the Barossa valley to the Finke River in the Centre. Without knowing Jesus as their friend and the friend of all human beings, these missionaries would not have bothered to endure 14 years 2000 km away from the next town without vacation and break. And they would not have bothered to learn the language of a people that according to common agreement was a dying race. If the Aboriginals were considered by the immigrants to be full human beings – which many white settlers did not do – they were in any case considered not fit to compete with the white man; so, if they resisted the establishment of cattle farms on their ground, they could be hunted like animals.

To such hunted and despised people the missionaries came, learned their language, taught them and protected them against the encroaching settlers and the police which was clearly on the side of the white settlers. On the mission grounds the Aboriginals found refuge, found

sympathy – and they heard about Jesus, the friend of all mankind.

But the gradual physical decline of the Aboriginal population stopped only 40 years later when another missionary managed to get a pipeline built which helped to grow vegetables and fruits. He had seen a drought which lasted seven years – which is not unusual in that region! – and that in it 90% of the children died and many adults, too. So he worked hard with the help of friends to have a pipeline financed and built which brought water from springs some 7 km distance. Since the people were supplied regularly with vitamins from vegetables and fruits of the mission gardens, the mortality decreased drastically and the Aboriginal groups started again to increase in numbers.

Up to now the day of the arrival of the first piped water on the Mission compound is celebrated annually and is the biggest event of the year: a combination of Thanksgiving Day and Schützenfest or village feast. And also on such a celebration you can hear the “Ladies’ Choir” of Hermannsburg, which even performed in the Sydney Opera, sing: “What a friend we have in Jesus...”

No doubt, the experience that Jesus is their friend has become a central item in their faith and life. When 30 years ago the mission lease – an area bigger than an average German county – was handed over to the Aborigines and the missionaries retreated, many sceptics expected that they would abandon the Christian faith and return to the traditional Aboriginal religion. However, the contrary happened: the church expanded. Also the neighbouring tribes understood: It is good, in all the difficulties of adjusting to modern world, in the temptations of alcohol and liberty of the white society, to

have Jesus as a friend and guide. Today, a higher percentage of Aboriginals are Christians than of the white population in Australia.

Can this experience from a continent far away be also our experience? Does the Bible encourage us to see in Jesus our friend – not mainly our Lord and Master?

Actually, this is a topic touched only few times in the Gospels. In Luke, Jesus, who is belittled by His pious enemies as “a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners” (7:34), calls the disciples His friends (12:4). And in John 15:14-16 we read how Jesus addressed His disciples (NEB): **You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I call you servants no longer; a servant does not know what his master is about. I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father. You did not choose me: I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last ...**

Let us consider these words of Jesus now. First, some observations:

(a) Jesus says: “You are my friends” – not: “I am your friend”. So, it’s an offer, a gift to the disciples: they are lifted up from the stage of learners and servants to that of friends.

(b) This upgrading comes at the end of their learning time with Jesus. It is in Jesus’ last discourse before His death that He gave the designation “Friends” to His disciples. It is a kind of graduation ceremony – similar to a Degree which is awarded at the end of the theoretical training period.

(c) Such a designation implies some kind of mutuality,

and those who are called “friends” by Jesus, rightly also can call Him their friend. But friendship does not necessarily imply equality.

That Jesus calls His disciples His friends, does not mean that they are on equal footing with Him in future. He continues to be their master, their Lord and God.

(d) If the designation “friends” is a kind of graduation title of the disciples, are we then entitled to this honour also – and can call Him our friend, too? Yes, it applies also to us – if we also have accepted Him first as our master and teacher and have understood, as His disciples did then, that He is God’s revelation to mankind and that He, as God’s Son, has paved the way of life for us. If we believe in Him, we are also His friends.

So then – what does it mean that **we are friends of Jesus?**

1. As friends, we are informed about His intentions.

This is for Jesus the most important mark of friends – that they know of each other. They don’t have secrets which they hide from the other. Jesus had told His disciples what was important for Him: the secret of His personality; the intimate relationship He has with God; the mission which He received from His divine Father: **I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father.**

Three years they had shared their lives. And in this time He had disclosed to them more and more His nature and ministry:

Their life together with Jesus – seeing Him as He healed the sick, mastered nature, cared for the food of

thousands, comforted people heavy laden, freed people burdened by their wretched past, and even called dead persons back to life – had convinced them of His divine nature. And so they understood when He said: “**I and the Father are one**” – that He had not only the authority as OT prophets had, who also occasionally performed miracles, but that here was a quality going beyond that of a *Rabbi* or man of God – that Jesus really was God’s special Son. And that He not only had the good intention, but also the authority to make people free, to give them a new life, to open new dimensions for their relationship to God.

And when John wrote down His Gospel, they had also understood what Jesus had meant pointing to the Comforter or Advocate He was going to send from the Father: that is was the H. Spirit whose power they experienced in the congregation, and whose presence was felt to be the continuing presence of Jesus among them.

It was only many years later, that this experience was formulated by the Early Church as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. But it is – in a nutshell – nothing else than what Jesus has revealed to His disciples not only in the Farewell Discourse in John’s Gospel, but there with special emphasis: that He is God’s Son, that there is an intimate relationship of God Father and Son, an identity of their destination to help mankind, and that the H. Spirit is their continuing presence among the believers.

All this they had seen, heard and experienced – and that’s why Jesus could say: *I have disclosed everything to you – and, because you are well informed, you may consider yourselves to be my friends.*

We also can be included in this designation “friends”, because Jesus continues to be present among us – in the words of the Gospel, in the Holy Sacraments, in the power of the Holy Spirit. He still discloses His and His Father's intentions to us, and as we address Him in prayer – whether we pray to Him directly as to our friend and master, or to the Holy Triune God – we may hear His voice.

2. As friends, we are important to Him.

Real friendship is a gift which happens to you – it is not something you can choose and get as you like. **You did not choose me: I chose you:**

that's the word by which Jesus tells his disciples: *the initiative was not on your side – it came from my side. I saw and called you because I knew you would be the right people and could become my friends. I chose you because you are so important to me!*

It's comforting for me to know: It was not my initiative and decision to become a Christian. Sure, there was a day when I consciously said “Yes” to Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. But long before that day He had chosen me and wanted me to be His. And when my faith started to lose vigour, He always sent friends or events or the answer to a prayer which re-assured me: I really belong to Him, and He does not let me go alone.

Theologians of the past have struggled hard on the question whether the Bible teaches a double predestination – the destination to eternal life and eternal death – or only a destination to life. I never found this dispute helpful. But I found it comforting for myself that I could see in my own life: it is God's initiative that I am His child, it is Jesus Christ who has chosen me – not the

other way round. I am so important to Him that He does not let me go alone.

And that is true for all of you, too!

Praise and thanks be to Him!

3. As friends, He empowers us to be fruitful in our lives as Christians.

Real friendship implies mutual obligation. Again, it is not a matter of decision, but it just come naturally: friends stand for each other, help each other, pursue common goals.

That is not a condition, it just happens if you have a friend. If you are in trouble, he helps you. If he has good and worthwhile goals, you support him.

If we turn to Jesus in our prayer, we will get response and encouragement. And He expects us to share in His ministry of helping people to their destination, to life eternal: **I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last ...**

In other words: He expects us to carry on His ministry. When he spoke these words to his disciples, Jesus was about to die at the cross – to fulfil His ministry on the earth. Just before our reading passage He had stated (v.14): **There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.** Jesus is about to do just that – to die in order to open up the way to heaven for his friends, for anybody joining the ranks of his followers.

We know of it, but others need to know also in order that they will have this chance, too! Oral witness is good, but the witness of life is as important: a life governed not by hunting for honour and wealth, but by love and compassion for those in want of inner and outer peace, of relief, of meaning for their life. Our gifts are different and

therefore also the fruits we can bear. But each of us can go on and continue Jesus' calling in his or her way!

“What a friend we have in Jesus!” Yes, everybody who has lived with Him will agree:

He has changed and enriched our lives. Without Him and His friendship, we would not want to live.

That does not let disappear all problems and troubles of life. In the Australian Hermannsburg, problems of adjustment to modern society abound, and it is a temptation to forget them by abuse of alcohol. In Africa – also in Ethiopia, in Central Africa or Southern Sudan or any other country in which we find sizable churches – there are other problems like group egoism and corruption. In our German setting individual egoism, lack of orientation for life and loneliness are major problems. In all these challenges we have a clear message: Let yourself be found by Jesus! Then you will have a friend on your side in all situations of life. You can only gain!

Amen