**The Rt Revd Alison White, Bishop of Hull. What is friendship?**

**Introduction by Speaker 1, Dave Male**

It is a great pleasure for me to introduce Bishop Alison White. Many of you will know her, she's the Bishop of Hull. We have known each other for some years, because Alison, when I was at theological college, she was my lecturer in mission and evangelism, so everything I know or don't know, I'd put down to Alison.

She has an amazing background, parish priest, advisor on local mission, theological college lecturer, DDO, part of the Springboard team - we could go on and on. And she combines, I think, a really interesting mix of vocation, spirituality and mission.

But I often introduce her, which I know she doesn't like because she's a very humble person, as one of the wisest people I've ever met. I remember a time when she came to meet with the group that I was a part of and she classically said, "Oh, I'm sorry I haven't got really much to say. I've just scribbled down a few things." This was 12 years ago. I still refer to the piece of paper I've got from the notes I took from that discussion, because it was so profound and the kind of thing that you want to return to again and again.

So I introduce her with great expectation, (I'm going, I'm going)! And it's just great that you're able to join us and help us think through this important aspect of what is friendship about? What does it mean today? So thank you.

**Speaker 2: The Rt Revd Alison White:**

That's a worry. Well, hello, how are you doing? You okay? I mean, it's an awful lot, isn't it? When you arrive in a new place. Did you come on your own? Did you come with somebody else? Who's here on their own? Yeah, I thought so. I'm here on my own as well and there was a lot of kind of wandering about, wasn't there at the beginning and thinking "Oh, I don't think I know anybody here after all!" It seems like that you walk into the massive crowd of people and you're sizing it all up, aren't you? All the time thinking, "Well, yeah."

Awful isn't it? If the door were nearer and I didn't know Dave, I'd have gone, "Oh no, no, not at all." So are you seasoned conference goers? Anybody here for the first time in Swanick? Yes! That is market research, Benita. I don't know what we do with it now, but at least we've established that.

But actually I think especially for those of us who here on our own or here in this place for the first time, it is a bit kind of scary. And who am I in the midst of all of this? Tom, I wonder if you would reveal my one and only slide.

This is it. I may have played the card a bit too early, but I like it. It's mostly Tom's work. I told him what I wanted. He did it.

I'm here to offer just a few thoughts and they really, they genuinely are scribbly thoughts, about what makes friendship.

Here I am on a platform. It's not the friendliest place to be. In fact, standing up here can be quite lonely. So I'm hoping that just over the course of these few minutes, we will connect with one another because actually that's what I'm hoping you'll be doing in the course of this 24 hours connecting with one another. Aren't these fab?

I mean I thought it was a sign of my age. I thought I'd got the large. I thought I'd been given the large print version and then to my great relief I found that everybody had the large print version so all of a sudden I felt included and isn't it great? Because it means you know that those of us who go to conferences from time to time, that terrible thing of, "I know I can see you've got a name badge, but it really isn't very British for me to stare where you've pinned it."

We learn about moving from being strangers to being friends by doing it. What I'd really like to do is actually come and chat with you. Except that we haven't got that long, just a chat table by table or person by person because actually that would be what would make the difference. At least it would make it for me.

And all of us here have come full of stories. We've come full of experiences. I've heard a whole load already just in the few, well however many, maybe a couple of hours that I've been here now, some really great things and we each of us carry with us our own stories of what it means to be a stranger or what it means to become a friend.

It's an extraordinarily long time ago since I was in the playground, when I was this size, I'd been lots of playgrounds all the time but, but when you are small, that awful kind of feeling of "Can I be your friend?" And worse and worse, getting picked for teams... This is going to turn into a therapy session now, that awful scarring thing of "Am I part of, or have I been left behind when everybody else got to..." You know the feeling.

And there we are with our stories of what it means for us to become friends. And when we're small and we're negotiating all of that kind of thing, you can swap your best friend quite easily, can't you? Because you stop being best friends with somebody. You start being best friends with somebody else.

It's a long time ago that I was a child in a playground, but what I learned then about friendship has actually stayed with me and grown and matured and developed over the course of all the years since. And the older I get, the more precious my friends are to me. I don't know, but I know loads of people, but my friends are more and more special.

So I want to ask you a question. I mean it's a real question, not a sort of platform rhetorical question. What makes your friend, your friend? Think of somebody now. Just think of somebody. I mean a real person, not an imaginary.

If there's anybody here with only an imaginary friend, there will be somebody to chat to you later, okay? Think of your friend. And now what I want you to do is just with the people who sitting around about you, either on your whole table or just somebody sitting next to you, think about what's the recipe?

What makes a friend a friend? It's not a difficult question. It's an essential question. What makes a friend, a friend? What makes your friend, this person you've thought of, into your friend. My real hope is that you are now proving my point, which is that it will be a lot more fun for you to talk to each other.

I hope that as you talk, I hope you didn't go too general. Did you go general? Probably we did. We're at a Christian conference. That's our job, but I hope that you've got in your mind, in your imagination, in your heart, that person who just came to you when I said, think of a friend.

I stood here and I thought of a friend and it's just, and inside I feel better. I feel a bit braver. I feel known. I feel like even if I really bomb out here, it doesn't matter because she will still be my friend. Now, the thing is, we can't bottle it. We can't pour that recipe that what makes that particular friend, our friend into a bottle and say, "Okay, here we are strangers to friends, have this." Because every single encounter, every relationship that begins and develops is of course unique.

And one of the things that made me say yes, apart from the inordinate amount of bribery that Dave offered me, was that I think what we're talking about here is actually one of the most important and beautiful things about being a human being. That we have the capacity for friendship.

And the amazing thing is we have it because that's the way we're made. Every single human being is made like that because we're made in the image of God. So when we talk about strangers to friends, we're not talking about something religious, we're not talking something specifically Christian. We are talking about being us, most fully and in the way that we were made. That's our capacity. It's our capacity for building relationships, for opening ourselves to growing in trust, for commitment. That would be one of the things that I'd have in my recipe that trust, that openness, that commitment.

I'm not just going to be around for this term in the playground. A friend is for life, mostly. It doesn't always work out like that, but that's our hope. That's what we're wanting to offer. And for me a friendship is a real thing of mutuality. It isn't just I'm doing you a whole lot of good and I'm not receiving anything from you. When we become friends, we offer and we receive.

Two ways and I wonder if that's one of the things we need to learn in our offerings as church. It isn't just that we've got it and you haven't and we're going to give it to you. It is that we are human beings together, exploring what it means to be human, and in that exchange, discovering more about who God is and how profoundly he loves us. I think that's fantastic. So I don't want to do friendship. I want to be friends and I want to be offered that by others.

I think one of the most wonderful things about this extraordinary imagination of our creator is that he made us not just one by one by one by one, but he makes us to be us, and there is something key in that, drawing us more fully into becoming ourselves because of our relationships, one with another. I'm in danger of getting all theological, but actually I think that is the key and friendship is part of how we understand what it means to be Christian. You all know this bit, so you can sing it with me if you'd like.

Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you, I do not call you servants any longer because the servant doesn't know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I heard from my father."

Why are you still slouching?

Sit up, sit up! You are called! We are called to be friends and you look so calm! I mean it is an extraordinary gift to us, isn't it? Transforming like it said in that bright green quadrant at the top, we are being transformed and obviously when we're absorbing what Jesus is saying to us, we know we're at the pinnacle of what it really means to be a friend. And frankly it scares me. This laying down my life lark was a bit more than I was bargaining for. I mean I was thinking more of a latte together once in awhile rather than the whole thing.

But actually, that is what Jesus says. He says that nothing can be greater than laying down our lives for our friends. So how keen are you on moving somebody from being a stranger to a friend? That's the issue.

The thing that encourages me and keeps me going is that Jesus also ate with his friends a lot. I like that. That I can manage. Eating, I can do. He told loads of stories with his friends. That too. I can do the stories part of it. That's great. He did a load of walking about the place with his friends and picking up friends as he went on the way, and for some people that friendship was just too much and they couldn't join in and that's part of the deal too.

We're living in strange times, I think. In all kinds of different ways, and I suspect that there are all sorts of diseases that come into our lives and into our communities and divide us and split us and make us less than we might be.

And if you have a look at that left hand picture over there, I wanted us to have a picture of what it may be, how it is for us from time to time, but that sense of being on our own - loads of people around, but somehow nobody is seeing me. Nobody's paying attention to me. And that awful sense of isolation, even in the midst of busy-ness and all kinds of things happening. I think that's one of the huge dis-eases of our time. We are out of kilter with what it means really to be human. If I'm right in what I was saying just a few moments ago, that God has made us to be us, that we become more ourselves, because we're in relationship.

We are diseased. Dis-eased. And one of the great longings of Christ and the work of the spirit is to heal our diseases. So I think what we're on to in our conversation together, in this gathering and much more widely, is part of the medicine of the gospel, is part of our contribution to opening the doors, the windows, to opening our hearts and our lives so that healing work of the spirit can actually take root, can grow, can bear fruit, so that people really can know they don't have to be strangers.

This young woman in the crowd, I don't know her, I don't know where Tom found the photo for me, but she's a real human being. That feeling of I don't belong. That feeling of what do people think of me, and one of the diseases of our time I think is I need the perfect profile.

The people who are around me, am I as good as them? Am I as clever, as beautiful, as successful as... And I don't know who you were thinking of about your own friend, but the friends that I thought of, those issues just are not issues. It doesn't matter because we're friends. We're not comparing one another.

And one of my sadnesses is, I wander about the place being a Bishop, is that people will all so resonated with what you were saying, Benita, the number of people who say to me, "I'm not religious. And I say to them, that's all right because I'm not really very religious either. I just kind of have a job that makes me look like that."

But actually the number of people who one way or another have said, "I don't think I'm good enough to come to church," or "I'm not the right kind of person." Have you found that at all? I mean, completely unprompted. I'm not being an evangelist with them. I'm just knocking around and listening at whatever we're at together and that's what comes out without any prompting. So what is the dis ease that allows that to come out of somebody's mouth to a perfect stranger?

Do you mind if I tell you another of my worries while I'm here? Well, actually, unless you all say no, I'm going to is the honest truth. Sometimes I get worried about this word friendship. Sandra, I'm sorry. It's alright. I will redeem this before I get to the end, but it's because it could be a way to deal with all of that sense of isolation.

It could be a, "Well, I've got however many friends I have or perhaps I measured them in likes. There I am in a crowd. I do not wish to be unfriended." And the danger is I think that friendship becomes instrumental. It becomes a means to an end. And may God have mercy on us if we ever use friendship as a means to an end because I think that would be to diminish the gifts that God gives us in Jesus, of himself, as friend. Not in order to gain, but in order to give, so that awful sense of don't let’s ever make friendship a commodity, a commodity through which I got something useful. Or the kind of relationship that we use to describe only people who are like us.

One of the things that makes me incredibly happy when I go to church, which I have to do quite a lot, sort of goes with the territory, and I go to an awful lot of churches. And the ones that make me happiest is where there's a real mix of people. Different. They're not all kind of the same.

It's the genius. It's the genius of Jesus that he welcomes all kinds of people, and better and better the ones he seems really to enjoy hanging out with are the tax collectors, the sinners, the prostitutes, the ones who are really not very nice. And how many of them have become our friends.

So let's not ever have friendship as a commodity. The move, the scary move is to take away that front, that perfect profile that like and fit in with my own gang and to take those steps and it's so flawless. Remember what I said at the beginning, this isn't about them out there. This is about me. It's about you. How much really do I want to be known? How much do I really think you, St Swithun’s or St George's are actually going to welcome me for who I am, not just who you want me to be, because that will make a big difference to me. If I'm ever going to put anything of myself into relationship with you.

Long time ago and fairly far away, I thought I really ought to try and make some reconnection with a God who had let me down very, very badly and who I think at that time in my life I would have counted as an enemy, and certainly not as a friend. But I kept on meeting people who turn, who I liked and enjoyed their company. We did a whole load of good things together, and most of them were Christians. It was deeply worrying to me and very unnerving, but they hung around with me enough that in the end I thought, "Okay, well I'll give it a go. I'll go to church." And I went to a church because this is the olden days. It was very full, sorry.

But the church was very full of, of all sorts of people. And quite a lots of people of my age on stage, and on the way out, Oh no horror of horrors. The vicar said, "Hello. I don't think I've seen you before." Freeze, panic, exit. But I'm very polite. I'm very well brought up and I can talk my way out of most things. So I did tell him my name. He seemed perfectly pleasant, rather old, but perfectly pleasant, and off I went and some time later, and I'm not going to hold you up with a story now, but sometime later I returned. And because of the journey that I was on, I went to take communion.

There I am and Steven, that was his name, Steven put the bread in my hand and he called me by my name. And in that moment something changed for me. Deep down I wouldn't have been able to tell you what it was or what it was about. But at that moment something changed because I discovered myself known, and Steven was the one who made that real and flesh and blood to me.

And then better and better, an invitation came from somebody else. "Why don't you come and have tea with us?" And there we are. It's that eating thing again, becoming part of. There's no way I would have told anybody about what was going on for me, but I was included. I was made part of all of that.

So look at the right hand picture. I guess a lot of people here in this room will recognize that icon of friendship, the real one lives in Taize. And I guess also that lots of us in the room would have heard of Taize that extraordinary place in France, in Burgundy, where people, lots and lots of young people, mostly young people, come from all over the world and all kinds of different backgrounds.

It's years since I've been able to go, but again, this was transformative for me and I wanted to bring that picture to you because for me it speaks volumes about what I experienced when I went to Taize. No common spoken language, but a language of connection, a language of community, a language of friendship.

That's all rather kind of platform speak, there's a language of connection and community and friendship. I mean it, but it works out because we're all here together. It works out because we're going to have to queue for the food, and we're going to get to practice that here as well. And if you play your cards right, you can end up in the queue every time with somebody you don't know. Horror, to some of us. Joy to others. And it's fine if you just want to hang onto the person that you came with who is already your friends.

But actually that business of getting food and eating food and sharing food and washing up, that opens up the possibility for chat, for listening is part of the experience there in Taize, it's part of our experience here. It can be part of our experience at home in our own places.

One of the more challenging but friendship building experiences in Taize was the loos. I think we'll just draw a veil over that, but just let's say it doesn't, you get to know people in all kinds of different ways and all kinds of different circumstances, which is why I began where I began about this friendship being a common human experience. Let's not get too prissy about it.

And then in that place we came often and often to worship. We came together. Strangers, we came to be face to face with the one who loves, and knows, and invites, and includes. Extraordinary, and here in this icon of friendship, we see these two walking side by side. Maybe one of them is Jesus, because actually people never know when they're going to come across him on their journey. They never know when he's going to show up beside them because often he doesn't mention his name. Often, he's just there, often he's just with us isn't he, and then our eyes were opened.

And we think, "Oh yeah, my heart was burning on, now you come to mention it was." My husband Frank, he's a great guy. I'm sorry you can't meet him. He cycles. Now don't from moment think Lycra and drop handlebars, think cords and very bright yellow jackets and looking a bit like a Christmas tree because he's got this awful wife who says, "Don't you go out unless you're very visible."

Anyway, he was cycling back from the church where he worships just the other night and a guy came out on his bike just in front of him dressed in black. So it's dark. It's this time of year. This guy comes out in front of him in black, no lights on, and Frank has a moment of “harrumph!” and cycles that little bit faster and comes alongside him and says, Frank says to this guy, so I hear, "Excuse me mate, have you ever thought of having lights on your bike?"

And so the conversation began. Now, Frank isn't, I'm younger than Frank. Frank's cycling along, hope I can keep up talking to them. Anyway, they fell into conversation these two guys cycling along together. And Frank was, he tells me, he was weighing up whether he could cycle away fast enough if this guy took exception to what Frank was saying to him.

Because at some point Frank is overcome by a moment. It was like it was Sunday. Frank said to him "Well actually I am a vicar." "Are you?" says the guy in black on the other bike. And their conversation starts, I think doing it by on foot or sitting around the table is a whole heap easier and I would recommend it. Their ways are about to part and this man holds his hand out to Frank and says "Shake."

Isn't that? I just think that's beautiful. So they did. They shook hands as they were cycling along. But somehow, I think something at that move from being stranger to friend was happening. Frank says he'll keep cycling and looking out for the guy. We're in this together. We're in this side by side and sometimes it's a whole lot easier to be side by side, isn't it? Doing something together because actually sometimes face to face, maybe a bit too much to manage, especially early on. And yet in the human heart and the human experience there is that longing to be known. Now I only see in a mirror dimly, but then I will see face to face. Then I will be known. How important that is as we offer it as a gift.

As I get to know you, as you get to know me, maybe we can open our lives a bit to each other. Maybe we could go heart to heart, not just side by side. Maybe you tell me what your hopes are, because if you were to tell me some of your hopes, I mean your real ones, not your pious ones, then maybe I could tell you some of mine. Because mine are a bit frayed. They're a bit shabby. I'm not really... Anyway, perhaps if you told me some of yours, I tell you some of mine. Because actually I wouldn't mind telling you a bit of my story. Actually I have told you a bit of my story today and it's a funny old thing isn't it? Because I don't know what you make of it.

I'd love to be able to trust some of my fears to you. After all, you say that perfect love casts out fear and maybe I haven't known heaps of that. I'd like to be able to trust you. And I will welcome from you all kinds of things that you want to give me. If we can know that we really are human beings together, that neither of us, none of us needs to be lost in a crowd, but that actually the real hope is that we could be found together in Christ.

Now, here is my bonus gift to you. It is a quarter to four. The back of my wonderful instructions say that the next thing happens at five to four. My gift to you, 10 minutes.