

GODLY FRIENDSHIP—2

Aelred of Rievaulx

If we are to say ‘No’ to certain illegitimate forms of relationship,¹ then we should have something better to replace them with. A church leader directed me to the church’s strong tradition of deep friendship as embodied in the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167 AD).

Aelred was born in Northumbria, son of a Catholic Christian priest (shortly before priests were required to be celibate), schooled probably at Durham, and served in the court of King David I of Scotland. In 1134 he left the court to become a monk in the new Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx in Yorkshire. He was novice master there 1142–1143, abbot of the daughter house at Revesby 1143–1147, and returned to Rievaulx as abbot 1147 until he died in 1167. The Rievaulx Abbey was ‘bustling with monks and lay brothers’ and grew from 300 to 650 under his leadership, giving shelter to all in need. As a leader in the growing and influential Cistercian order (founded in 1098; Aelred was a younger contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux), Aelred had dealings with the English King Henry II, and travelled as far as Rome. He was ‘a tireless and affectionate abbot and administrator, an effective mediator, and a familiar of kings, barons, bishops, abbots, and hermits’. From his writings, he is ‘known today primarily as the historian, abbot, spiritual director, and speculative and contemplative theologian’. In particular, he wrote ‘spiritual treatises, exploring the way to God through love of friends and intimacy with Jesus of Nazareth’. In these Aelred sought ‘to explain the nature of God through an exploration of the nature of the human soul, promising “Perhaps, when you have found the image, you will more easily find him of whom it is the image.”’²

Spiritual Friendship

In this late work, completed shortly before he died, Aelred ‘writes of the sacramental essence of friendship—the way in which men and women may by loving one another embrace Christ in this life and enjoy eternal friendship with God in time to come . . . *Spiritual Friendship* . . . through a series of conversations among friends in a monastery establishes the value of human friendship, from its origin in creation to its final enduring realization in beatitude’.³

Schooled in the classics as well as the Scriptures, Aelred modelled his book on Marcus Tullius Cicero’s book *De Amicitia* (‘On Friendship’), written by that notable Roman senator in 44 BC. This has the virtue of seeing friendship as a gift to humanity, not just to Christian believers (as we might begin today with the Australian notion of ‘mateship’). He starts with Cicero’s definition: ‘friendship is nothing other than agreement in [all] things divine and human with benevolence and charity’.⁴ But Aelred was not satisfied with stopping at Cicero, when he knew Christ. Here is his Prologue:

1. While I was still a boy at school, the charm of my companions gave me the greatest pleasure. Among the usual faults that often endanger youth, my mind surrendered wholly to affection and became devoted to love. Nothing seemed sweeter to me, nothing more pleasant, nothing more valuable than to be loved and to love.

2. Wavering among various loves and friendships, my spirit began to be tossed this way and that and, ignorant of the law of true friendship, was often beguiled by its mirage. At last a volume of Cicero’s

¹ These studies were originally given in the context of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey in 2017 on changing the law to allow same-sex couples to marry.

² From the Aelred Of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Cistercian Fathers), translated by Lawrence C. Braceland ; edited and Introduction by Marsha L. Dutton, Liturgical Press, Kindle Edition, pp. 13–25.

³ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, pp. 22–23.

⁴ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 52.

On Friendship fell into my hands. Immediately it seemed to me both invaluable for the soundness of its views and attractive for the charm of its eloquence.

3. Though I considered myself unworthy of such friendship, I was grateful to find a model to which I could recall my quest for many loves and affections. When my good Lord was pleased to restore the wanderer, to lift the fallen, and to heal the leprous with his saving touch, I abandoned the promise of the world and entered a monastery.

4. I immediately devoted myself to the study of the sacred writings, though previously, with eyes bleary and accustomed to the carnal gloom, I had not been able to see even their literal meaning. I began to acquire a taste for the sacred Scriptures and found that the slight knowledge the world had transmitted to me was insipid by comparison. Then I remembered what I had read in Cicero about friendship, but to my surprise it did not taste the same to me.

5. Even at that time, nothing not honeyed with the honey of the sweet name of Jesus, nothing not seasoned with the salt of the sacred Scriptures, wholly won my affection. Musing on Cicero's thoughts again and again, I began to wonder whether perhaps they might be supported by the authority of the Scriptures.

6. But when I read the many passages on friendship in the writings of the holy fathers, wishing to love spiritually but not able to, I decided to write on spiritual friendship and to set down for myself rules for a pure and holy love.

7. This small treatise, then, is divided into three little books. In the first I explain the nature of friendship and what was its origin and cause. In the second I note its fruit and excellence. In the third I disclose, as far as possible, how and among whom friendship can be kept unbroken to the end.⁵

'Aelred . . . shapes *Spiritual Friendship* in this way, beginning with the origin of friendship, then moving to the fruit of friendship in this life, and concluding with practical concerns of making, testing, and interacting with friends, always closely linking the realities of human life to the divine'.⁶

Aelred drew on the writings of Ambrose of Milan (339–397 AD), whose emphasis on the 'importance of equality in friendship', and 'explanation of the joys and obligations of friendship', and 'that friends may open their hearts to one another and share their deepest thoughts, helped Aelred turn Cicero's flat characters into living and individually characterized monks, friends of their teacher and of one another. By creating characters with recognizable personalities and a readiness to say what is on their minds and to treat one another as equals, Aelred imbued his treatise with the vitality of conversation among real friends'.⁷ Aelred, in presenting 'friendship as a route to the knowledge and unbroken love of God', was indebted also to Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), who 'reinforced Ambrose's Christian explanation of friendship, insisting on the presence of God in true friendship. He defined the friendship that will not end as established in God: "No friends are true friends unless you, my God, bind them fast to one another through that love which is sown in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Conf 4.4.7)'. But 'In showing friendship to be sacramental, carrying within it God's own unity and leading to friendship with Christ in this life and in eternity, Aelred rejects Augustine's view that one must choose between human friendship and loving God'. 'From this wide range of learning he produces a synthesis, a new understanding of the value and power of the best of human friendships—and the possibilities present even in those that are not the best'.⁸

⁵ *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 54.

⁶ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, pp. 40–41.

⁷ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, pp. 27–28.

⁸ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, pp. 29–31.

Friendship in Christ

Aelred starts from Christ's promise in Matthew 18:20, 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. He meets with a young monk Ivo, and begins:

You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third.

(Compare 1 Sam. 20:42, 'The LORD shall be between me and you'.) So 'human friendships begin with one or two friends, Christ making a third, then expand to include the many, as in the early church. Finally, continuing in Christ, friendship comes at last to perfection, including all in God's eternity':⁹

What statement about friendship can be more sublime, more true, more valuable than this: it has been proved that friendship must begin in Christ, continue with Christ, and be perfected by Christ.¹⁰

Being in Christ, this friendship can cope with imperfections in the other, for it is the love of Christ himself:

it is proper for my friend to be the guardian of mutual love or of my very soul, that he may in loyal silence protect all the secrets of my spirit and may bear and endure according to his ability anything wicked he sees in my soul. For the friend will rejoice with my soul rejoicing, grieve with it grieving, and feel that everything that belongs to a friend belongs to himself. . . . Though challenged, though injured, though tossed into the flames, though nailed to a cross, a friend loves always. And as our Jerome says, "a friendship that can end was never true."¹¹

Aware that 'human friendship is fragile and frequently interrupted both by life's demands and by death', even if it 'begins and ends in God',¹² Aelred is pleased to have this space in which to foster friendship—friendship needs dedicated time:

Now no one else is present to disturb the peace or to interrupt our friendly conversation. No voice, no noise invades our pleasant retreat. Yes, most beloved, open your heart now and pour whatever you please into the ears of a friend. Gratefully let us welcome the place, the time, and the leisure.¹³

'The first movement, which explains the origin of friendship in God's creation, concludes with a promise that human friendship may make one a friend of God (1.1–2.14). It is a conversation between two people (though Ivo is replaced by Walter in book two), which ends as a third arrives. The second movement concentrates on the experience of human friendship, considering such practical aspects as ways to establish and maintain friendship, then rises to anticipation of the time when great company of friends will be one with one another and with God.'¹⁴

'Aelred agrees with Cicero that friendship originated in nature, but he says that God is the author of nature and that all creatures participate in God's unity because God created them to do so. His explanation has three parts: God is the architect, the builder of the universe; God has placed within creation a principle of order according to which all creatures are joined and united by peace and fellowship; all creatures, shaped by God and ordered by God's agents, participate in divine order and so in God himself.'¹⁵ It is a wonderful vision, rooted in God's creative purpose.

⁹ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 32.

¹⁰ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.10, p. 57.

¹¹ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.20, 24 p. 59.

¹² Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 33.

¹³ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.1, p. 55.

¹⁴ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 33.

¹⁵ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 41.

False 'Friendship'

Though friendship has its origins in God's good creation, the human fall into sin has warped and disfigured it:

from the very beginning nature impressed on human minds this attachment of charity and friendship, which an inner experience of love soon increased with a delightful sweetness. But after the fall of the first human, with charity growing lukewarm, when cupidity crept in and let private gain supplant the common good, avarice and envy corrupted the splendor of friendship and charity by introducing into the debased morals of mankind contentions, rivalries, hatreds, and suspicions.¹⁶

Aelred 'distinguishes among three kinds of human relationship commonly called friendship: the carnal, the worldly, and the spiritual, of which the last is its own reward'.¹⁷

The carnal is created by a conspiracy in vice, the worldly is enkindled by hope of gain, and the spiritual is cemented among the righteous by a likeness of lifestyles and interests.¹⁸

He is insistent that any relationship which promotes or leads to what is not consistent with God's will cannot qualify as true friendship: 'Although he shows friendship as open to men and women and therefore places no barrier to sexual relationship between friends who are married to each other, he bans what is shameful—*inhonestas*—from true friendship (e.g., 3.87)'.¹⁹

Love is foul and unworthy of the name of friendship if by it anything disgraceful is exacted of a friend . . . any friendship that is inappropriate for the good is unacceptable . . . Nor has anyone learned the meaning of friendship who wants any reward other than friendship itself.²⁰

Illustrating throughout with Biblical examples, he nominates the 'friendship' of Amon with Jonadab, who counselled Amon to rape his sister Tamar (see 2 Sam. 13:1–22) as a misdirected relationship.²¹ While none of us are wholly good, he says 'I call those good who within the limits of our mortal life live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, wishing neither to exact anything shameful of another nor, if asked, to offer anything shameful.'²² Any relationship that wilfully participates in evil falls far short of the real thing:

Those who share a vested interest in vice falsely claim the fair name of friendship, because one who fails to love is not a friend. One who does not love a comrade loves iniquity, for one who loves iniquity does not love but hates his own soul, and one who does not love his own soul will certainly be unable to love the soul of a comrade . . . those who delight in the name of friendship alone are cheated by its likeness, not sustained by the truth. But when so much sweetness is experienced in such empty friendship, which lust pollutes, avarice corrupts, or wantonness defiles, just imagine the sweetness to be experienced in this other friendship: the more righteous, chaste, and open it is, the more it is carefree, enjoyable, and happy.²³

Friendship and Love

Aelred draws a helpful distinction between friendship and 'charity' (love). While friendship must always have love, not all love can be classed as friendship:

IVO. Are we to conclude, then, that there is no distinction between friendship and charity?

AELRED. On the contrary, the greatest distinction! . . . By the law of charity we are ordered to welcome into the bosom of love not only our friends but also our enemies. But we call friends only

¹⁶ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.58, pp. 66–67.

¹⁷ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 41.

¹⁸ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.34, p. 62.

¹⁹ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 42.

²⁰ *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.39, p. 78; 2.55, p. 83; 2.61, p. 84.

²¹ *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.41, p. 79.

²² *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.43, p. 80.

²³ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.35–36, p. 62

those to whom we have no qualm about entrusting our heart and all its contents, while these friends are bound to us in turn by the same inviolable law of loyalty and trustworthiness.²⁴

Friendship in this life is a special relationship, different from the generality of love as we are able to practice it in this less than perfect age, yet it prefigures what will prevail more generally in the age to come:

not everyone we love should be welcomed into friendship, because not all are suitable. Since a friend is the partner of your soul, to whose spirit you join and link your own and so unite yourself as to wish to become one from two, to whom you commit yourself as to another self, from whom you conceal nothing, from whom you fear nothing, surely you must first choose, then test, and finally admit someone considered right for such a trust. For friendship should be steadfast, and by being unwearied in affection, it should present an image of eternity.²⁵

Aelred says about true friendship:

Wholly alone is one who is friendless. But how happy, how carefree, how joyful you are if you have a friend with whom you may talk as freely as with yourself, to whom you neither fear to confess any fault nor blush at revealing any spiritual progress, to whom you may entrust all the secrets of your heart and confide all your plans. And what is more delightful than so to unite spirit to spirit and so to make one out of two that there is neither fear of boasting nor dread of suspicion? A friend's correction does not cause pain, and a friend's praise is not considered flattery.²⁶

There are other benefits mentioned later:

the advantages of counsel in uncertainty, consolation in adversity, and other help of this kind.²⁷

It follows that such friendships should be carefully chosen:

You notice then the four steps that lead to the perfection of friendship. The first is choice, the second testing, the third acceptance, and the fourth the highest agreement in things divine and human with a certain charity and good will.²⁸

Such friendship also needs to be wisely exercised:

In a friend, a certain four qualities should be tested: loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience. Loyalty: you may confidently entrust to the friend yourself and all that is yours. Right intention: from friendship the friend may expect nothing but God and the natural blessing of friendship. Discretion: a person may know, as we believe, what should be offered and what should be asked of a friend, when to condole with or congratulate or even correct the friend, for what reason to do these things, and the right time and place for them. Patience: when corrected, the friend may not fret or despise or hate the one who corrects him, and he himself may not be ashamed to bear any hardship for his friend.²⁹

Such friendship can continue on, even across the boundaries of death. Aelred speaks of his relationship with a beloved friend who has since died:

Although he is now removed from the human condition, the remembrance of my beloved brother—or rather his untiring affection and embrace—are always so fresh in my mind that in spirit he seems never to have departed. For there he is always with me, there his devout countenance beams upon me and his

²⁴ *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.31–32, p. 61.

²⁵ *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.6, p. 89.

²⁶ *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.11, p. 72.

²⁷ *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.61, p. 83.

²⁸ *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.8, p. 90.

²⁹ *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.61, pp. 101–102.

gentle eyes smile. There his joyful words have so much flavor for me that it seems that either I have passed over with him to a better life or he still shares this humbler one with me.³⁰

Friendship and the Age to Come

‘Aelred threads throughout the work a compelling imagery of food and drink, tacitly insisting that friendship involves the whole person: body and mind, senses and spirit. Friendship is not, he implies, limited to reason or emotion; it is somatic [bodily], experiential, sensuous, uniting all of a person to friends and to God’:³¹

Thus rising from that holy love with which a friend embraces a friend to that with which a friend embraces Christ, one may take the spiritual fruit of friendship fully and joyfully into the mouth, while looking forward to all abundance in the life to come.³²

Special individual friendships in this life are given as a foretaste of what will prevail generally and exponentially in God’s ultimate goal and purpose, ‘as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph. 1:10):

This is that great and wonderful happiness we await. God himself acts to channel so much friendship and charity between himself and the creatures he sustains, and between the classes and orders he distinguishes, and between each and every one he elects, that in this way each one may love another as himself. By this means each may rejoice over his own happiness as he rejoices over his neighbor’s. Thus the bliss of all individually is the bliss of all collectively, and the sum of all individual beatitudes [blessings] is the beatitude of all together.³³

And he concludes:

Surpassing all this is prayer for each other. In remembering a friend, the more lovingly one sends forth prayer to God, with tears welling up from fear or affection or grief, the more effective that prayer will be. Thus praying to Christ for a friend and desiring to be heard by Christ for a friend, we focus on Christ with love and longing. Then sometimes suddenly, imperceptibly, affection melts into affection, and somehow touching the sweetness of Christ nearby, one begins to taste how dear he is and experience how sweet he is . . . while looking forward to all abundance in the life to come. When the fear is dispelled that now fills us with dread and anxiety for one another, when the hardship is removed that we must now endure for one another, when, moreover, along with death the sting of death is removed—the sting that so often pierces and distresses us and makes us grieve for one another—then with the beginning of relief from care we shall rejoice in the supreme and eternal good, when the friendship to which on earth we admit but few will pour out over all and flow back to God from all, for God will be all in all.³⁴

³⁰ *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.5, p. 71.

³¹ Introduction, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 47.

³² *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.134, p. 126.

³³ *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.79, p. 107.

³⁴ *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.133–134.