In the early 1500s, when Magdalen was still a new foundation, three friends spent sixty pounds together to enable the College to buy a manor at Standlake, about ten miles west of here. Their names were John Claymond, John Higden and Robert Morwent. Two of them, Claymond and Higden, were successively Presidents of Magdalen (the third, and the fourth). Claymond subsequently became the first President of an even newer institution, Corpus Christi College; in time Morwent succeeded him, as the second President of Corpus. The property at Standlake would yield three pounds a year: this was to be spent, according to the terms of the benefaction, in several different ways. First, set amounts of money were to be given to those who attended a Requiem Mass for the repose of the benefactors’ souls, to be celebrated every year within several days of the First Sunday in Lent. Secondly, it was to compensate the Sacristan for buying candles and wine for the service and arranging the bell-ringing. Finally, it was to enable a College servant to buy two wagon-loads of straw to be taken to prisoners incarcerated in Oxford Castle. Any leftover money was to be spent repairing or renewing four beds in the Alms House, beds that Claymond had already bought for ‘the charitable use of the poor.’ The Alms House is gone; the jail by the Castle Mound is now an expensive boutique hotel. But the distribution of Claymond’s Dole is believed to have continued all this time.

For more than four hundred and fifty years, the money was handed out in Groats and Half Groats (fourpence and twopence pieces). Because it was the customary way of dispensing the Dole, Magdalen kept using Groats for this purpose, long after they had gone out of circulation; an approach was even made to the Royal Mint asking for more to be supplied, but it was refused. The College finally ran out, and with the advent of decimal coinage, allocations were fixed in their current form in the 1970s: 50 new pence for the President and 20p for each Fellow; 10p for Demies (Scholars) and Academical Clerks; 5p to each Chorister. So it continues today, as we’ll see in a few minutes. More significantly, we continue to remember Claymond, Higden and Morwent in our prayers: we’ll do so this morning in the intercessions, again at Evensong, again in a simple Requiem on Friday. And we continue to remember why they left us this benefaction in the first place: that their friendship might be remembered for ever. They wrote this:

Since in the changes and chances of this mortal life there is no tie so strong and firm as the tie of true friendship, we, John Claymond, John Higden and Robert Morwent, have determined, so that not even death should annul our union, to leave behind us a monument, that shall endure for ever, as a testimony of our sincere attachment.

So, in remembering them today, we celebrate true friendship. Friendship is notoriously hard to define, but Francis Bacon, writing within a century of Claymond, Higden and Morwent, sets out three of its characteristics, the fruits of friendship:

The first is what we can call openness of the heart. With a friend we can share our grieves, joys, fears, and, Bacon says, ‘whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it.’ Bacon presents this as if it were a medical matter: ‘We know diseases of stoppings and suffocations are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind: you may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open the spleen, flowers of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum
for the brain; but no receipt [that is, no prescription or remedy] openeth the heart, but a true friend." ¹

The second fruit of friendship, according to Bacon, is enlightenment, growth in understanding. Friendship, he says, ‘maketh daylight in the understanding, out of darkness and confusion of thoughts.’ Not only do we necessarily see any issue more clearly when we talk to someone about it, and have to put our thoughts into words. There is also the more broadly recognised growth in understanding that comes when a friend gives us good advice, ‘faithful counsel.’²

The third and final fruit of friendship, Bacon says, ‘is like the pomegranate, full of many kernels.’ He calls it ‘aid and bearing a part in all actions and occasions’ – by this he means friends helping each other, a friend doing things which the other cannot do … in this life, and often continuing after one of them dies.³

This raises a question about practical advantages to be gained from friendship. It’s a topic which exercised St Aelred, a twelfth-century English monk and abbot, who wrote an important little book called Spiritual Friendship. Aelred was interested in the quality and integrity of friendships, and in the difference between true friendships and those which are ‘not worthy of the name.’ Among the latter he included friendships which are, as he puts it, ‘based on a likeness in evil’; those disfigured by pretence, flattery and subservience; and friendships arising merely from ‘the consideration of some advantage’ – because, as he puts it, ‘among the good, friendship always precedes and advantage follows.’⁴

Aelred’s book strikes many of the notes that would be sounded by Bacon five centuries later. But Aelred wrote with a more religious edge which highlights the spiritual value of friendship, and – important to say as we begin Lent – points towards a connection between true friendship and the way we relate to God when we pray (or try to pray, or just imagine prayer).

So for example, on that first fruit of friendship, openness of heart, Aelred says this: ‘We embrace very many with every affection, but yet in such a way that we do not admit them to the secrets of friendship, which consists especially in the revelation of all our confidences and plans.’ This true friendship which opens all its confidences and plans to another, Aelred says, is what we see in Christ, when he gives his disciples the commandment to love one another. In that passage (John 15), Jesus says to them, ‘No longer do I call you servants … I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.’⁵

On receiving valuable advice, faithful counsel, Aelred says ‘Let friend counsel friend as to what is right, securely, openly, and freely.’ His special emphasis on love does not make him shy away from friends’ responsibility to correct and admonish each other, and be open to correction, even reproof. But he makes much of the need, in true friendships, to avoid ‘anger

² Bacon, pp. 83-84.
³ Bacon, pp. 85-86.
⁵ Aelred, p. 112.
and bitterness of spirit in correction.’ For him, ‘the best companion of friendship is reverence.’ 6

Finally, when Aelred writes about friends helping one another, about generosity and self-giving, he takes things to a new level by saying we ought to dissolve the distinctions that are made between what one person owns and what another owns. (A critic might say this is just the kind of dangerous anticipation of Marxism you might expect from a monk who had given up all possessions!) Aelred quotes with obvious approval an ancient writer who says, ‘Men would lead a very happy life … if these two words were taken from their midst: namely, “mine” and “yours.”’ 7

This vision of radical self-giving, readiness to be corrected, and Christlike openness of heart, shows how the fruits and characteristics of good friendships can be connected with the things that last forever – how they can deepen our relationship with God.

It may not be exactly what Aelred had in mind, but they also suggest a model for prayer that can be of use as we embark on Lent. Think how not only our friendships, but our lives of prayer, would be enriched …

- If with God, as with our friends, we dared to open our hearts more completely, sharing all our griefs, joys, fears, confidences and plans?

- If, with God as with our friends, we made ourselves more fully open to correction, humbling as we know that can be?

- If, with God as with our friends, we tried to throw away the words ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ – maybe just give them up for Lent – to explore more deeply a life of radical self-giving, whatever the cost?

Think how often in our prayers, when we are unreservedly open with God about everything, when we share all our thoughts and hopes, worthy and unworthy – think how often prayer can bring order to chaos, peace to our thoughts, a new sense of direction and purpose.8

Think how we can find ourselves guided and corrected, as if by the best of friends, lifted up and set on the right path again, inspired to reach out in practical ways to those in need and genuinely to be of service.

Aelred was bold enough to rework very famous words about love that we find in the first epistle of John – and with these I’ll conclude. ‘What is true of charity,’ said Aelred, ‘I surely do not hesitate to grant to friendship, since he that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him.’9

---

6 Aelred, pp. 120-121.
8 Consider what Emerson says about truth as a basic element of friendship, and of how his thoughts about human friendship also apply to prayer: ‘A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud.’ *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 347.
9 Aelred, p. 66; cf. 1 John 4:16.