**Friendships**

In the office at a local cemetery a grim faced superintendent pointed to the record number in his register. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘There are exactly the same number in here as people alive in town.’ On a happier note, an elderly lay preacher observed with a convincing smile, ‘I’m looking forward to heaven. I’ve just realised I have more friends there than I have here now!’

Contemplating that important journey westwards many people spend a great deal of time planning for what they are leaving behind them, maybe to ensure that inheritances are fairly distributed - I wonder how Wesley’s six silver teaspoons were distributed! – or wanting to provide links by which others will remember them. I want to leave friendships. After all they are only left for a while. They catch up with us. True friendship, like love, is indestructible.

Thinking of post-retirement and preparation for the heaven-adventure, brings to mind again the picture of travelling westward. The embarkation is about friendships – sad farewells to some and anticipatory excitement about reunions and new relationships.

For many of us, especially having shared a place among those whom Simone Weil called ‘the friends of the friends of God’, we have learned the value of the people who have been brought close to us. While we may choose our close friends, there are many other friendships which are created for us by the circumstances of our lives. Unlike the closest friends, they are not all the same kind of person. They will have had different characters and experiences. They will have brought varying gifts into our lives; sometimes able to confirm our intentions; maybe there at the right time to encourage us through times of doubt, or weakness; more often just being around – someone to hold on to when the boat rocks.

I remember Jesus says ‘I have called you friends,’ and thank him for the one friendship I am sure of always. I hope I shall leave the memory of my friendship with him as encouragement and hope for others.

