



LENT BIBLE STUDY - 2022 ENTERING THE PASSION OF JESUS

#5

THE LAST SUPPER – RISKING THE LOSS OF FRIENDS

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INTRODUCTION

Luke 22:14-27, John 13:1-16, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The gospel writers, plus Paul, give us five variations on the theme of Jesus' Last Supper. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul all emphasise the following: Jesus gives thanks, breaks the bread, distributes and tells the disciples that the bread is his body. He then takes the cup and proclaims it to be the covenant in his blood.

Only Luke and Paul mention the "new" covenant.

Only Luke places the dispute about greatness at the Last Supper.

In John's gospel, Jesus does not speak of the bread and wine as his body and blood – this was already done earlier, following the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:53-55).

THE PASSOVER

Matthew, Mark and Luke, but not John, place the Last Supper on the first night of the Passover holiday. This is when the people would share in the Passover – *seder* – meal, to commemorate the exodus from Egypt. The foods eaten have symbolism:

matzo – unleavened bread; a reminder of unleavened bread eaten by the slaves in haste, since there was no time for the dough to rise;

bitter herbs – a reminder of the bitterness of slavery;

green vegetables are dipped in salt water – a reminder of the tears of the slaves.

Jesus would be familiar with the matzo and bitter herbs. Some traditions were developed further over time, as were many of the words now spoken in present day Judaism.

In Jesus' day, for example, they would eat lamb, the Paschal offering, that had been sacrificed at the Temple that same day (Luke 22:8).

John tells the story happening a day earlier, so the meal is not a *seder*. In John, Jesus is crucified, not on the first day of the Passover, but the day before, when the lambs are sacrificed at the Temple. John connects the images of lamb and sin-offering (see John 1:29). Jesus, the Paschal lamb, will save his people for eternal life – just as those homes marked with lamb's blood were saved as 'the angel of death' killed the first born of the Egyptians.

The Passover theme is of slavery to freedom. John marks the movement from sin to reconciliation; death to life.

BETRAYAL

Paul remembers Jesus' words: ". . . *on the night when he was betrayed.*" (1 Corinthians 11:23) It literally means, "*when Jesus was handed over.*" For Paul, though, it is God who hands Jesus over or delivers Jesus to death. (See Romans 8:32.) For Paul, Jesus was not betrayed – Judas isn't even mentioned.

Yet, all four gospels tell us of Judas' betrayal, and all put him with Jesus at the Last Supper. Judas is a complex character.

In Mark, Judas begins as an exemplary disciple – healing, exorcizing and proclaiming the good news. However, after Jesus was anointed by the woman (Mark 14:10), Judas went to the chief priests in order to betray him – no motive is given.

In Matthew (Matthew 26:15), the timing following the First Supper is the same, but a motive is given – greed, hence the thirty pieces of silver, an amount mentioned three times in Matthew, but nowhere else.

Luke adds a further detail – Judas is possessed (Luke 22:3).

John confirms Luke’s point (John 13:2), and we learn that it was Judas who protested about the anointing of Jesus because he was a thief (John 12:6).

Following the betrayal, Mark says no more. In Luke-Acts Judas buys a field with the money, and he dies a disgusting death (Acts 1:18) – a story that the church at times embellished saying that if folk acted like Judas they would die in the same grotesque way.

In Matthew, Judas throws the pieces of silver back into the Temple and hangs himself (Matthew 27:5).

According to John, Jesus refers to one of them being a devil (John 6:70) - in reference to Judas. Jesus also says similar harsh words referring to those who might betray the Son of Man (Matthew 26:24).

Yet, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Judas shares in the Last Supper. He is there when Jesus speaks of his body and blood, and when Jesus distributes the bread and says that one of them will betray him. Judas is a human being – we can’t demonise him. Judas calls us to conscience.

BREAD AND CUP

Lent is associated with fasting, not eating. It is usual for Christians to avoid certain foods during Lent. No matter how often it may be practiced or varied, many Christians share in the Eucharist or Communion – a meal that finds its origins in the Last Supper.

In saying that the bread is his body, and wine his blood, Jesus is using sacrificial language. It also resonates with Temple sacrificial language and practice about sharing a meal with God. Such acts bind people and communities together.

However, in the Temple sacrificial system, no way was blood to be consumed – not in the Temple, at home or in the field. (See Genesis 9:4). Nor was eating human flesh permitted.

So, in response to Jesus’ words in John 6:53, where Jesus states that unless the disciples eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, they would have no life, you can see why they exclaimed the difficulty of this teaching (John 6:60). For them the language is shocking – another example of Jesus using shock tactics.

The Eucharist/Holy Communion should never be taken for granted – for if we do, we miss the ‘shock.’ We must remember that Jesus gave up his life. Paul expresses how seriously this meal should be regarded in 1 Corinthians 11:27,29. Paul connects the body of Jesus with those assembled in Jesus’ name (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

Participating in this meal is a joy, a blessing, a sign of abundant life . . . and a risk. The risk being that we state that we are reconciled to others (See Matthew 5:23-24). We are acknowledging we are all in the same family of God.

SERVICE

Luke and John both connect the Last Supper with the call to serve. In John’s gospel, Jesus washes the disciples’ feet (John 13:14-15) – we are to do the same. It is a sign of humility, even more so than anointing with expensive perfume.

Jesus overturned the tradition of a slave washing the master’s feet – something Peter found too challenging (John 13:8-9). He doesn’t get that Jesus is showing him what humility, what true service, looks like. As Matthew 20:28 affirms, Jesus came to serve, not to be served. Jesus is teaching Peter that service is intimate, up close and personal – something humble and generous, that can be seen and appreciated. It is as if we are free to serve, and that in serving others, they are freed from whatever sin and bondage they may be experiencing.

