

Lent Compline Talks 2016

St Mary's Kidlington
Sunday 28th February
Prof John Morris

The Eucharist in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) Psalm 4 & 91 (1st & 3rd); 1st reading; Visit, O Lord, Look Down

In the first two Lent Complines we looked at the original Passover meal when Israelites escaped from Egypt, and 3 very different meals in the Old Testament. Tonight we turn to the origins of our Eucharist tradition in the New Testament, and specifically in the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. As we shall see next week the account in John is very different.

We now live in a world in which each denomination and sect has its own (sadly vigorously defended) forms and traditions. In fact, the word "Eucharist" (which comes from the Greek meaning 'thanksgiving') is never used in the NT as a name for the rite, though it derives from the phrase that the Lord, as he broke bread "gave thanks". It is however a very ancient usage as it appears in the Didache (a late 1st century Christian teaching document otherwise known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles").

I wonder how many of you have carefully compared the accounts of the Last Supper in the 4 Gospels? Matthew, Mark and Luke give essentially the same account, but with some small interesting differences. The three accounts all start in roughly the same way and are immediately preceded by Judas's visit to the priests to offer to betray Jesus for money.

It was at the time of the Passover (a 7-day festival) "the first day of unleavened bread". Either the disciples ask "Where shall we go to prepare the Passover" or (in Luke) Jesus tells Peter and John to go and prepare. At that point the disciples were in Bethany (2 miles from Jerusalem); it would have been Thursday morning and the Passover lamb was to be killed after midday roasted and eaten in Jerusalem that night.

Then comes what to our ears sounds slightly odd and has been the foundation of various conspiracy theories. The disciples are told to go into the city (Jerusalem) where they would meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. They had either to tell him that Jesus and the disciples would keep the Passover at his house, or should follow him and say to his master "where is the room reserved for me to eat the Passover with my disciples?" The disciples would then either prepare the room, or find "that the room had already set out in readiness". So either Jesus had got it all fixed (the conspiracy theory) or by some divine coincidence they would bump into someone whose master had a room to let. However, apparently it was common custom for people in Jerusalem freely to loan out rooms on festival night so that all those on pilgrimage to the city might be able to celebrate the feasts properly.

What can we learn? – perhaps that if we are away from home, and it is our practice to take communion regularly, that we should 'go into the city – because surely some church will have been making preparations for our feast. More importantly, I suggest that we should learn from the Jerusalem house-owner who had a room ready and prepared. In a very real sense we never know in advance when Christ is going to make a request of us to do something for him here in England in 2016 and it behoves us to have our "room" ready and prepared for whatever our Lord wants us to do.

So, in whatever way, the meal was prepared. In Luke the next thing that happens is that Jesus says "How I have longed to eat this Passover with you before my death! For I tell you never again shall I eat it until the time when it finds its fulfilment in the kingdom of God". Then he took the cup first and then the bread – indeed in Luke in the authorised version, the cup of wine appears

twice the second time “Likewise also the cup after supper (we’ll see in two weeks that in fact the Passover meal had 4 cups).

Be that as it may, in all the synoptic Gospels Jesus says a blessing (almost identical to the sentences “Blessed are you, Lord God ...” which we use every week), breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples, then likewise the cup, with words “This is my body” “This is my blood” with which so familiar and to which we shall return in detail in subsequent weeks.

At some point during supper, Jesus then tells the disciples that one of them will betray him. Can you imagine the shock! They had recently been welcomed by jubilant crowds waving palms, and Jesus had cleansed the temple of the moneychangers, and had trounced some of the best legal minds in the priesthood in argument “After that nobody ventured to put any more questions to him” – everything seemed to be going so well! Jesus had had some pretty hard things to say to them about what would happen – that the temple would be torn down, that the disciples would be handed over to the courts and flogged in the synagogues, and to keep awake and alert “for you do not know when that hour will come” – but **no suggestion at all** that one of them would betray him. This provokes the “Not I, surely” (or as memorably set to music in Bach’s St Matthew Passion “Lord, is it I?") Jesus’ response is the same in Matthew “One who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me” and Mark “It is one of the twelve who is dipping into the bowl with me”, but a little different in Luke “My betrayer is here, His hand with mine on the table” – then comes the prophecy “it would be better for that man if he had not been born”. Only Matthew has Judas ask “Can you mean me?” and Jesus reply “The words are yours” (John, as we shall see next week, has something similar) – This has always struck me as strange – if it could be heard sufficient for a gospel writer to recall, surely the other disciples would have heard, but if so why did they do nothing? We shall never know.

For us, however, there is the chilling implication that, as Christ’s 2016 disciples, all of us are capable of betraying our Lord, however much we protest that we love him. Indeed Luke includes one more vignette at this point. Having each protested their loyalty/innocence, “A jealous dispute broke out, who among them should rank highest?” – perhaps who was the most loyal?

This led to Christ’s admonition to us all “the highest among you must behave like a servant” and the promise that they – as people who had stood firmly by Jesus in his times of trial – would ‘eat and drink at his table’

We are all surely guilty at times of thinking ourselves better, more loyal to our Lord than we really are and Christ, who knows us better than we know ourselves, rightly condemns that hubris; but he also gives that wonderful promise that, if we stick with him however hard the going, we shall ‘sit and eat with him in his kingdom’.

All three gospel accounts also have the ever outspoken Peter protesting that he is ready to go with Jesus to prison and death (though in Matthew and Mark this occurs only after they have left the supper room), “Everyone else may fail you but I never will” only to be told that by cock-crow the following morning he would have denied even knowing Jesus three times.

Luke’s Gospel account of the last supper concludes with Jesus explaining that this moment is a real turning point. “Before, when I sent you out barefoot and without a purse did you lack for anything?” contrasted with Now that they must be prepared “Whoever has a purse must take it with him and his pack; and if he has no sword let him sell his cloak and buy one!” “Look Lord, they said, we have two swords here” “Enough, enough, he replied”

The meal ended with them singing the Passover hymn and they went out to the mount of Olives.

The message for us is surely that we can never know when or where challenges to our faith, our witness to Christ, or our faithful living will come. We shan’t need swords, but we shall need the strength that the Holy Spirit, through our regular breaking bread together in our Eucharist, can bring.