

Lent Compline Talks 2016

St Mary's Kidlington
Sunday 6th March
Prof John Morris

The Eucharist in St John's Gospel

Psalms 3 & 91 (2nd & 3rd); 1st reading; Lighten; Look down; Be present

Last week we looked at the Last Supper in the synoptic gospels of Matthew Mark and Luke where the meal is stated clearly to be a Passover meal and Jesus institutes what we now call the Eucharist. By contrast, in John's gospel it is not a Passover meal and, although contains some events which parallel synoptics (for instance speaking of betrayal and specifically to Judas), John's account makes no mention of the statements "This is my body; this is my blood", and also contains a lot that is not in the synoptics – the washing of the disciples' feet and lengthy speeches by Jesus known as the "Final Discourses"

I'm leaving the washing of the disciple's feet till next week, but was it a Passover meal? I don't want to spend much time on this technicality, but John clearly states "It was the day before the Passover" and, to back it up, in Ch 18 when Jesus was led to Pilate's house the morning after being examined by Caiaphas, the Jews stayed outside to avoid defilement, "so that they could eat the Passover meal". Geza Vermes, who has been described as 'the leading Jesus scholar of the 21st century' and others argue that John's earlier timing fits much better with the subsequent events of the trial and crucifixion.

But John's account is clearly very different (though very similar in style to the 3 letters of John). I've been fascinated by this difference for a while. I was brought up with the idea that John's gospel was written much later than the other 3 and probably well into the 2nd century and was possibly a product of the Gnostic community. However if you Google "dating of gospel of John" you will find a 2009 article by Rowan Williams at St Paul's Theological centre which reminds us that the earliest piece of any written gospel on papyrus and reliably dated *before* AD 120 is part of John; and that was found in Egypt before which it must have been copied several times – that takes us back to AD 100. When you add to that the fact that Ignatius of Antioch appears to have read John's gospel, and that the gospel itself speaks about people being thrown out of synagogues and rejected by the Jews (for which there is good Jewish evidence in AD 90), modern scholars now put John's gospel much earlier, and contemporaneous with the synoptics.

So who wrote John's gospel, and why is it so different in parts from the other three? Two Johns compete for authorship. John the son of Zebedee (the disciple whom Jesus loved) and John the Elder for whom there are references in Ephesus where the gospel is thought to have been written. It's been said that it could not be John son of Zebedee, because he was a simple fisherman, yet we have evidence that Rabbis at that time also had "day jobs" (Paul was a tent maker). Rowan Williams also points out that the Greek of St John is actually very simple (compared to that of Luke or Paul) even though the theology is very sophisticated. Whichever it was, the gospel states that the author was actually an eye-witness or had spoken at length to someone who was.

So why is the gospel of John so very different? The synoptics attempt to give more of a historical flavour to the message, and John at first sight is a much more poetic rendering of the message. However, there is evidence that certain sayings in John are as old or older than their synoptic counterparts; and John's topography around Jerusalem is often better than theirs. Rowan Williams reminds us that people in cultures such as that at the time of Jesus have very powerful memories and can remember extensive communications of many kinds – BUT they are not walking tape recorders and their memory can be filled with what Rowan Williams calls "mental footnotes". He suggests that we think of a group of followers sitting around this now very old man who had been

an eye witness, trying to get things written down before it was too late. So they might say to him "Tell us about the last supper" and you don't know what is the recalled memory, and what is the mental footnote. What would you have done in that situation? – just write it all down – and remember there are no quotation marks in Greek!

However, here is one important take home message for this evening – Williams suggests that, whether it's a direct word of Jesus himself or of the evangelist who had lived with him and spent a lifetime thinking and praying about that experience, it is the word of the holy spirit. And John's purpose *was* to be selective. At the end of his Gospel he says clearly "Jesus did many other things as well, if every one of them was written down I suppose the whole world would not contain the books that would be written". He also says "but *these* are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His Name."

So, to skip through the 4 chapters John 13-17 that deal with the last supper. In 13 we have first that the devil had tempted Judas to betray Jesus. At the start of supper there is the washing of the disciples feet (our topic for next week), Jesus' statement that one of them would betray him and, prompted by Peter, the disciple whom Jesus loved, asks Jesus who, is shown it is Judas to whom Jesus offers the piece of bread he has just dipped, then Judas goes out having been told "Do quickly what you must" then those chilling words. And it was night!

The farewell discourse then starts with Jesus saying that the Son of Man is Glorified and that he is going where they cannot come, but gives the command that they love one another as he has loved them – with the important addition, that only if they love one other will they be His true disciples. This theme recurs again and again and is as relevant to us today as it was to the eleven.

The next section continues the theme of Jesus leaving them and preparing a place for them in His Father's house. Doubting Thomas says "But we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way" to which Jesus replies to Thomas and to us that he – Jesus – is the way, the truth and the life, and that He is the only way in which we can understand what God the Father is like. What an enormous message this is – that if we want to understand something as totally incomprehensible as the creator of the universe, we only have to look to Jesus. And what is more that, although Jesus is no longer with us in body, the Father will send the Spirit of Truth, and that "the Spirit of Truth will call to mind all that I have told you". Then comes the beautiful "Peace is my parting gift to you" – Jesus' own peace such as the world cannot give.

The next section starts "I am the real vine and my Father is the gardener" and goes on that the disciples are the branches that should bear fruit. So we, as latter day disciples, are the 21st century twigs of that vine, but still with the mandate that we should be fruitful and spread the message of the gospel, with the promise that if we heed Jesus' commands including that we love one another, we shall "dwell in His love". BUT, its not going to be easy; the disciples are told that the world may hate them, they will be banned from the synagogue and "anyone who kills you will suppose that he is performing a religious duty" – so there it is – the ethics of ISIS writ large in John's gospel!

The final section – Chapter 17 – is a lengthy prayer starting "Father, the hour has come. ... This is eternal life: to know thee who alone are truly God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." Jesus then speaks of glorifying God on earth *by completing the work the Father had given him*; that he has taught the disciples who he sends into the world, and he prays for them, that they may be one, as he and his Father are one. Then comes perhaps the most directly important bit for us, as Jesus prays also for those who, through the disciples' words, put their faith in Jesus. "May they be one as you, Father are in me and I in you." So there we have it – at the Last Supper Jesus actually prays directly to God the Father for **us** – here and now in Kidlington in 2016 – if we are his 21st century disciples and put our faith in Jesus, that God will be in us and we in Him.