

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: John Chapter 13: Some Notes

This is a good point at which to take a break: familiar yet unfamiliar, well-known but full of surprises, open to very different interpretations. If anyone with a rough idea of the Bible Story was asked to say what they knew about the Last Supper, their answer would probably include “Passover Meal” and “Jesus doing the first Holy Communion”. The more reflective might say that it probably didn’t last very long, because the Disciples were soon off to the Garden and the arrest of Jesus. None of this is supported by John’s account of what happened. In John, it isn’t the Passover Meal; there is no mention of something special being done with the duo of bread and wine; and the amount of teaching that took place suggests a rather long and leisurely meal. So does this divergence between John and the other Gospel writers cast doubt on the whole story?

I suggest the opposite is true. If the compilers of the New Testament had wanted to sell a party line – making the most of a “botched revolution”, they would surely have tidied up apparent discrepancies which must have been quite as obvious to them as they are to us. Instead, they put the very different accounts of a key event in the Christian story side by side, and invited their contemporaries and their successors to benefit from all of them. John uses a lot of Eucharistic language in his Gospel, and might well have been writing with use of the text at the Eucharist in mind. He didn’t need to remind his hearers of the fact of the Eucharist. Just when the meal took place during the days of the Passover Feast was less important to him, that the message of Love, Service and Sacrifice. For John, this was the crucial occasion for the earth-bound Jesus to get his disciples to understand his mission and their part in it. Shortly before the naked Crucifixion, the stripped down Jesus does the menial dirty feet washing that was normally the role of female slaves. There isn’t a clearer statement of Incarnate Love means – for God and for us.

The geography is interesting. It seems that Judas was sitting/reclining beside Jesus, with [John] on his other side. The piece of food handed by host to guest was a sign of special favour. That sign was given to Judas. What was going on here? Jesus and Satan fighting over Judas, with Jesus making a last bid to keep Judas faithful? Was it all pre-ordained, with Judas doing what God/destiny had determined he would do? That hugely powerful last line: *He went out; and it was dark.* I find it quite impossible to believe that Judas was just looking forward to a nice big cash reward for treachery. (What did he do with the money when he got it!) But if Peter was upset by Jesus playing the servant, because Peter thought he was following a very different sort of Messiah; wouldn’t Judas the revolutionary longing for armed insurrection think “O, for heaven’s sake, I have to force this man’s hand, and make him live up to my expectations, or the next thing I know Jesus will become a***** social worker or set up a bread and fish bar for unemployed grape pickers!” ?

The “new” Commandment was, of course, not new. The Old Testament already put first and foremost loving God and loving your neighbour. But there is a big difference between putting some spare coins in a collecting box to benefit my neighbour, and changing his

incontinence pads, or jumping in front of a moving car to save his life. Oh, and we tend to interpret our neighbour that we have to love as the nice guy who has done us more than one good turn – not the ***** who tried to do me down. Jesus loved Judas, and Caiaphas and the Centurion. Psalm 41.9 is the Jesus reference to your best friend letting you down.

In the conversation with Peter, we get in particularly sharp form the point that Jesus knows us. I've always loved the comment from a (particularly wise) Confirmation candidate that she could talk to God about things she couldn't talk to her mother about. Her mother may have known her better than she realised. But God in Jesus knows us even better than we know ourselves – both what we have done, and what we are capable of doing.. for good or bad.