

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John Chapter 16: Some Notes

No raising unrealistic expectations then! Jesus offers loneliness and perhaps premature death. Being kicked out of St George's might be no great deal: most people don't go there anyway, and you can go half a mile to another church. But exclusion from the synagogue (which is just what did happen to Christians) meant being ostracised by the community; and some rabbis said that prayers were only heard by God if offered in the synagogue. The disciples knew what they were letting themselves in for, as did later generations of Christians (including those being persecuted by other Christians). It is probably hard to empathise with those in one faith, or section of a faith, who think that killing somebody else who doesn't share their views is doing God's will; but there always have been and still are a lot of these God murderers. Why? At a less violent level of prejudice, why do Christians continue to shout at other Christians in the sure and certain knowledge that they are right and the others are wrong? (Note, of course, that other faiths are just as divided by rival certainties.)

The awkward enquirer will want to know why, given that there is only One God, Jesus has to go away so that the Spirit can come, and how the Father comes into it all – especially given that Jesus tells us we can talk directly to the Father because the Father loves us. There aren't any Alpha Course answers to this, at least not any convincing answers. Maybe try thinking in terms of God in human Jesus form inevitably having a limited life-span, and God the Father/Creator needing to offer human beings a sense of His presence in a form other than the creative force which holds the universe together. You are likely to have your own better way of describing the indescribable. It is worth looking at different translations for the first part of Chapter 16. They shed different lights on the meaning.

The "guidance into all truth" deserves some discussion. Christians at various times have argued that the Bible contains all the truth there is; that the Old Testament is as true as the New Testament; and that the Church (guided by the Spirit) is the font of all truth, including truth that is not easily referenced from either section of the Bible. Throw in a bit of discussion of why Jesus had to un-explain the Old Testament; and why Jesus used picture language which the disciples then had to explain. (John on the whole doesn't use Jesus parables, but he does use Jesus language with multiple levels of meaning.)

Just thinking aloud, but: a university professor used to teaching doctoral students would need to make some adjustments to teach the same thing to reception class children. Maybe that helps. Another perhaps relevant thought: It now looks as if human ancestors with some human characteristics were around about 450,000 years ago. God clearly isn't in a hurry, about our development and our learning. We certainly don't have to think of the understanding of God's wishes for how we understand our relationship with our enemies as fixed for ever in the "commandment" to slaughter them all.

One little aside: the disciples' wow moment here seems to have come less from Jesus moving beyond picture stories to straight talk than from him knowing just what they were worrying about – without them, on this occasion, actually asking him what he meant by going away and coming back.

One of the key messages comes at the end. Jesus, knowing that the disciples were still just a little way up a steep learning curve, and would for the most part scarp when the time of testing came, loved them still, forgave them, and relied on them.

The parallel of the birth pangs can't be carried too far. As a bloke, I am thinking nine months of discomfort, some days of excruciating pain, and then a lifetime of caring, exasperation, hurt, disappointment, and some highlights..... Underlying it, the conviction that it is worthwhile, though the experience overall falls short of perfection. The message about the Christian life in the next world is a bit different from the message about the Christian life in this world. Will we get, and how will we handle, perfection?? Back to the notion of progress and discovery there too.