

Reflections for Lent 2021 – Why did Jesus die? Session 4
Based on ‘Journey to the Empty Tomb’ by Paula Gooder, Canterbury Press, 2014

Session 4 – The Last Supper

Read Mark 12.17-26. You can compare the story in Matthew 26.17-30, Luke 22.8-39, 1 Corinthians 11.23-25. It is worth reading the story of the last supper in Luke’s gospel because it is the least familiar text. Matthew and Mark both begin their accounts of the last supper with the discussion between Jesus and the disciples about who would betray Jesus. In Luke this discussion comes at the end. Only in John’s gospel is Judas explicitly identified as the ‘betrayed’. Why did Judas do it?

When you read through the different accounts of the words of institution – the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of the bread and cup – you will realise that the words we use in our weekly service of Holy Communion are a mixture of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul. Only 1 Corinthians has the double command to ‘do this in remembrance of me’. Luke uses this command but only in relation to the bread. Luke mentions two cups. All the accounts tie the cup to a new covenant, but only Matthew associates the blood with forgiveness of sins. In Mark there is no command to the disciples to eat and drink, and neither Matthew nor Mark have a command that this action should be continued as a memorial of Jesus’s death. The focus is on Jesus’ blood poured out for many. The last supper has traditionally been seen as taking place at the Passover. At the Jewish feast of Passover the blood of the Passover lamb was daubed on the doors of the people of God so that the angel of the Lord would ‘pass-over’ their houses and not kill the first born. In the gospel story of the last supper the blood of the new covenant symbolises a new ‘passing-over’, a passing-over that Matthew associates particularly with sin. Christ’s blood saves us from the consequences of God’s judgement on our sin.

Remembrance – Luke and Paul focus our attention on the act of remembrance. In Greek the word is *anamnesis*. It means more than just ‘to call to mind’. When ‘remembrance’ is used in our Communion services it means ‘to make the event present again by our actions’. Jesus’ command to do this in *anamnesis* of him is so powerfully to recall the event of the last supper by our words and actions that we make it present in our midst. This is what the original Passover meal also did. The words and actions used at the meal served to make the first Passover present. The events of fleeing from Egypt were brought so vividly to mind in the present that it was as though it were happening again. Those celebrating the Passover also looked forward to a future when God would again intervene in the world.

In church, when the President says the words over the bread and cup and we take part in communion on a Sunday we are also time-travelling back to the past to be with Jesus and the disciples at the first Last Supper. We are also time-travelling into the future to be with the risen Christ and God, and the whole church throughout history, at God’s heavenly banqueting table at the end of time.

‘The last supper reminds us that God is once more leading his people out of slavery and into freedom, a freedom that is achieved this time, not by the death of the firstborn sons of others, but by the death of his own, most beloved son. It also reminds us that in this freedom we look forward to the time in the age to come when we will feast with God in his kingdom. Every time we commemorate the last supper we look backwards to Jesus’ death and forwards to the Messianic banquet and that action of remembering, of making present what is past and what is to come, transforms the present’ (p60).

‘The remembering that we do in our commemoration of the last supper is the most momentous theological action that we are called to do as Christians. It is an action laden with meaning and significance, though fortunately we do not have to comprehend it in all its complexity in order to do it’ (p62).

- In John 13 we have the account of the foot washing by Jesus. Is this the same meal as the last supper? John has no other account of the last supper. What kind of church would we be if we remembered the foot washing as often as we remembered the sharing of bread and wine?