

Entering the Passion of Jesus – Chapter 5

The Last Supper: Risking the Loss of Friends

The New Testament gives us five variations for Jesus' Last Supper: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have the same emphasis, as does Paul: Jesus gives thanks, breaks the bread, distributes it, and tells his followers that the bread is his body. Then he takes the cup and proclaims it the covenant in his blood. But there are also variations: For instance, only Luke and Paul mention the "new covenant," only Luke places the dispute about greatness at the Last Supper, and so on. In John's version, Jesus does not speak of the bread and wine as his body and blood.

"Rather than rush to harmonize the accounts, we should savor each one. In this chapter we'll look at several themes that the texts offer: the date of the Last Supper and its connection with the Passover meal...the betrayal, the bread and the cup, and the concern for service."

The Passover

In the Synoptic Gospels, but not John, the Last Supper takes place on the first night of the Passover holiday. Paul does not give us a specific date but he uses language connected with Passover. For John, the Last Supper takes place twenty-four hours earlier, which means the meal would not have been the Passover Seder. In John, Jesus the crucifixion occurs not on the first day of the Passover, but the day before, when the lambs for the Passover Seder are being sacrificed in the Temple.

John changes the symbolism: The original Passover marked the movement of Israel from slavery to freedom. For John, the Passover symbolically marks the movement from sin to reconciliation. from death to life. "Here we have another reason why churches that celebrate Passover seders might want to reconsider: if Jesus *is* the Passover, then celebrating a seder is unnecessary."

Betrayal

Paul, the "betrayal" of Jesus, and translation questions. From Levine's perspective there is no "betrayal" in Paul's letters "and so no need for a Judas." However, in all four Gospels, Judas is present at the Last Supper and he betrays Jesus. "As we move from Mark to Matthew to Luke to John, Judas looks increasingly malevolent. It is therefore difficult to travel back behind the New Testament texts and find the 'real' Judas. The Gospels leave us with different stories and so different impressions, each one worse than the previous one."

“In all four Gospels, Judas shares the Last Supper. He is present in the Synoptics when Jesus speaks of his body and blood, when Jesus distributes the bread, and when Jesus announces that he will be betrayed. Is Judas part of the group, or not? Has he a chance of being redeemed? Can he be saved? Judas too, is in the image and likeness of the divine. He is not a demon, although he may seem to us to be one. He is a human being. And we cannot afford to demonize human beings. Judas calls us to conscience.”

Bread and Cup

When Jesus says “Take, this is my body,” and then lifts the cup and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he is using sacrificial imagery. In present times, this language does not resonate well with most of us because we do not live in a culture where sacrifice is practiced. However, at the time of Jesus everyone, Jew and Gentile, understood the practice and significance of sacrifice. It was a way of sharing a meal with God (or the gods if one was a pagan) and it was a mechanism that bound families and communities together.

The Last Supper takes this imagery and connects it with Jesus sacrifice. “If we take the Eucharist for granted, if we take Communion as simply a form of dinner, then we miss the shock. Jesus is giving up his life. Paul takes this so seriously that he attaches a warning to participation. Those who do so in an unworthy manner will face consequences. “Participation in this meal is a joy, a blessing, a sign of life abundant...and a risk. The invitation to the table should come with a warning label: Am I reconciled to others in my world? If I am not, dare I approach?”

Service

Luke and John both connect the Last Supper with the call to service. In John’s Gospel the Last Supper also include the scene of Jesus’ washing the feet of the disciples and the commandment to follow his example. Foot washing is a sign of humility and service that was regularly performed by slaves in the first century. “Jesus point: no one is to lord it over another, and those who claim to be his followers should do what he does, in service to others.” Jesus is demonstrating what true humility and service looks like.

“It is insufficient, Jesus tells us at the Last Supper, to take up the role of a slave when we know there are actual slaves, human beings treated as property. To be a servant leader, to take on the role of a slave, also means to take on the role of freeing others—not only from sin but also from bondage. The risks of sharing that cup and eating that bread are high. We give up personal authority; we serve others, we are to free others.”