

St Andrew's Chesterton

Lent 5, 13 March 2016

John 12.1-8

A sermon preached by Nick Moir

I had a moment of revelation in our Lent group the week before last. It happens you know – even to me. We are following the Pilgrim course on the theme of the Eucharist. Near the beginning each week we read a passage of Scripture; in fact we read it three times, slowly and with a pause between them. We are asked to listen for our phrase that jumps out for us. We were reading from Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 11 (23-26) of the institution of the Lord's Supper – on the night when he was betrayed took bread (you know the words or at least a conflation of them with the gospel accounts because the president uses them at the Lord's table every time we celebrate the Eucharist. It was the very first words of the passage that jumped out at me:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night....

He then tells us in some detail what Jesus did and what he said. It is the only time in his writings that he ever does this. Of course he often tells us that Jesus died or rose again – he wants to tell us why he did, but in terms of the historical detail that's it – just the odd phrase. But here – every little detail. He took bread, he broke it, he spoke – 'This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. Likewise the cup. And he tells us where he got this account from. Not from one of the apostles who may have been there; not from someone who had heard the tale from someone who had heard it from one of the apostles. No, 'I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you'. Four chapters later he tells us that this Lord appeared to him: he appeared to Cephas, then the twelve, then 500 at once, then to James and all the apostles. And 'last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.' St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles gives us two accounts of this initial encounter but there may have been more. He recounts a conversation that took place between the risen Christ and Paul, words that were spoken, but there may have been more. Paul certainly seems to think that there were things revealed to him, shared with him, entrusted to him by the risen Lord that meant that he wasn't conveying things second hand – passing on what others had told him of the teaching of Jesus – but that he heard it himself. 'I received from the Lord....'

How long did the Lord have to convey to Paul what he needed to pass on to others? If there was a shortlist of all the important things that Paul and the early Christians had to know about and get right what was it? Is it irreverent of me to imagine the process of thought and prioritising? Now how long have I got, thinks the Lord? Five minutes – what can I leave out and what is the one thing I want to make sure registers in his mind so that he can tell everyone else? Shall I do the parables or the sermon on the mount? Shall I tell him how I was born or the details of how I died – or precisely what to believe about those things? Shall I make sure he's got the doctrine of the Trinity right or knows what authority I gave to Simon Peter. Or shall I tell him what my followers should do every first day of the week when they gather in my name – to take bread and wine in remembrance of me?

Ah, so this is quite important then?

The gospel writers seem to think so too. This sacramental meal is but the climax of lots of special occasions when Jesus sat down and ate with people. John in his account of the Last Supper – by far the longest – doesn't mention directly Jesus breaking bread and offering the cup. Some people have

thought that means he wasn't that interested in it, but that's not very likely when he gives a whole chapter (ch 6) to an extended meditation on Jesus as the bread of life: 'whoever eats this bread will live for ever; those who eat my flesh and drink my cup have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day'. And John tells us that on the day of the resurrection:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week... Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you'.

You will remember that Thomas wasn't there, but John picks up the story:

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.... Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'.

It doesn't say so explicitly but what you met together for in the evening after the work of the day was to eat, to share a meal. Later still John tells us of a breakfast meal which Jesus shared with the disciples:

Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

And rewinding in the gospel, five days before the Last Supper, that is on the Saturday evening or the Sunday Jesus comes to a meal in Bethany with his dear friends, Lazarus (whom he has raised) and his sisters, Martha and Mary. Jesus is a guest as he always is in these gospel meals right the way back to the beginning of his ministry when he is a guest at a wedding meal in Cana. At every meal he attended he made a difference, perhaps not always turning water into wine literally, but certainly so figuratively. His presence at these meals was electrifying, transforming; the company he kept was disturbing. Memorable meals because of what Jesus said to and did for others but also because of what others said to and did for him.

Take today's gospel reading. A lifetime's savings wasted – or so some thought – on a moment of madness, breaking open that precious jar of perfume and pouring it on Jesus' feet. Crazy, wasteful, embarrassing. Judas, who was - how shall I say? – the PCC treasurer (sorry, Michael) grumbled and told her off, but Jesus responds quite angrily, a bit like he did when they tried to shoo the children away from him, you may remember. 'Leave her alone.' Within the context of this meal she has done something beautiful for Jesus, an anointing for his death and burial.

Five days later Jesus is the host at a meal during which he lovingly pours water upon the feet of his disciples and wipes them. This time it is Simon Peter who objects – it's not fitting, it's subverting of the social convention in which it always had to be one further down the pecking order who did that job. 'You can't do that to me.' 'Yes, Peter, I must. You must be washed.' This wasn't just teaching Peter that he had to learn to serve, but that the pattern of following Jesus was even more costly than that. 'I have come not to be served but to serve and to give my life, to die – and so, Peter must you.'

My wife, who knows about these things, tells me that the words in the English language for 'host' and 'guest' have the same root – they are, if you like the same word. I rather like that, and I think Jesus would have rather liked that too. For the meal that he shares with us – the meal that he made sure we knew about and the most important details of which he made sure we would remember – is a meal where he is both host and guest and where he moves from one to the other and where we too are both hosts and guests. We prepare a table for Jesus, we bring him the bread and the wine, we pour out to him the love of our hearts, we seek to do something beautiful for him in our words, our music and song,

our sincere prayers, our flowers (when it isn't Lent), our gifts of money. We bring our beautiful gifts to honour the Lord who died for us and to remember that death as we break bread. But at the same time he prepares a table for us, a table where we are fed with bread and wine which are his body and his blood, his very life poured for us and offered to us freely and gladly.

We are encouraged to come in the same glad surrender of spirit as Mary – and as Paul who shared that same reckless abandon to the one who meant everything to him and to whom he poured out every scrap of his being and for whom no sacrifice was too great:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him... ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.