
The Last Meal Together

Sermon for St Paul's Anglican Church Boronia

29th March 2009

Previously from the St Paul's Pulpit...

We are in the middle of a series of addresses about the last week of Jesus life. The series is called "Jesus Final Week" which is a clever series title for a series about the last week of Jesus life.

And the only problem with this title is knowing whether to put an extra S after the apostrophe on the word *Jesus*. You know, is it Jesus' Final Week or Jesus's Final Week?

Carol began the series talking about the Sunday and Monday of Jesus' Final Week, in particular the *House Cleaning* aspect of it.

Then last week, Ken talked about the Final Teaching Seminar that Jesus held on the Tuesday of his final week.

And today I've been asked to share some reflections on the last meal that Jesus has with his disciples.

Still to come in this series are addresses by Ken on the Betrayal, the Crucifixion and the Empty Tomb. And then from Brian on the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

And yet, even though we shall spend *weeks* discussing this final week of Jesus' life, there is no way we can cover the whole breadth and depth of meaning that sits in these events.

The topic is just too immense to talk about everything there is to talk about.

So, I am going to narrow myself down to making just three points this morning. And the first has to do with this breadth, about just how big topic is.

Here are my three points.

First, we need to keep the big picture in mind while we look at just a few aspects of these history-changing events.

Second, whatever else the Last Supper does (and it does do some other things that have to do with Heaven and Eternity), whatever else it does, this last meal with the disciples changes the history of the human race.

And third, this change in human history has implications for how we should live in the here and now.

So to my first point, keep the big picture in mind.

You know that expression, *can't see the wood for the trees*?

I think it is becoming harder and harder to see the wood for the trees.

Our lives just seem to be full of bits and pieces. Everything is segmented up, divided into smaller and smaller pieces. The traditional slab of Cadbury's Dairy Milk has been overtaken by the packet of *bite*-sized chocolates. It's harder and harder to get a view of the big picture, the helicopter view. Of life. Of current affairs. Of everything. Of faith.

Once upon a time we listened to *The News* to get the big picture of what's happening in the world. Not anymore. News is divided up into sound bites. That's what they are actually called. Sound *bites*. Not

sound meals. Not sound dishes. Not even sound mouthfuls. The news is segmented, divided up. Into little edible pieces. One bite, the whole story.

Really? The whole story? Does anyone believe that anymore? I hope not.

Some of you saw me on ABC television news the other week. I'm sure it was a great thrill. Now most people would say that ABC news is among the more reliable news services. But the truth is, it's just sound bites, like all the others.

The guy from Woolworths who was seen in the story saying *twelve* words about Woolworth's intention to rescue food, had been interviewed for 15 minutes. It took him 15 minutes to tell something approaching the whole story. We heard 12 words.

And it's not just news that's the 21st century sound bite problem. It's everywhere. We sit alone in our cars in traffic, making no connection with the community outside. I don't know if you saw Top Gear last week, but the host, Jeremy Clarkson, was standing by a British motorway and said he would stand there for 15 minutes and give a pound away to a charity for every car that had more than one person in it.

You know how many cars he saw, on a busy British motorway, in a quarter of an hour, with more than one person in it? Six. Six!!

Well, I could go on...

Instead, let me show you a picture.

This is a picture called *The Procession to Calvary*. You can see the cross and some figures trying to help someone, presumably Jesus, carry it.

Now here's another picture. This picture is called *The Procession to Calvary*. You can see a ring of people standing around while three crosses are prepared. Two are already standing. The middle one is going up.

Now here's another picture. This picture is called *The Procession to Calvary*. You can see St John comforting a woman, probably Mary.

Wait a minute, you're saying. All these picture can't all be called *The Procession to Calvary*.

The resolution to this dilemma is quite simple. Each of these pictures is just a bite out of the whole picture. And here it is. It's called ... you guessed it ... *The Procession to Calvary*. And it has a windmill in it because it was painted by Jan Bruegel the Elder, who lived in Holland in the 16th century.

The Bruegels, for there was more than one, painted many paintings like this. Some of you will know the famous Tower of Babel painting, or the one showing nearly a hundred different children's games.

What Jan Bruegel the Elder obviously wanted to do was to give us the whole picture. He put all the little sound bites, or picture bites in this case, onto one big canvas. We begin to see the relationship between things. Some things leap out, others you may not see for quite a while.

Bruegel reminds us that this last week of Jesus happened within a culture. And within that culture lots of things were happening. Some things, like soldiers preparing the cross, or St John comforting Mary—these things had something to do with what was happening to Jesus.

But Bruegel also reminds us that life went on for others while all this was happening to Jesus and his group of followers.

Judy and I had the privilege to see this particular painting two weeks ago in the Historical Art Museum in Vienna. I stood right in front of it and looked at it for about ten minutes. I could probably have stayed for an hour, but Judy wandered off and sat down. And I know how to take a hint.

But because, for ten minutes or so, I stood close to this painting, which in real life is almost as big as the screen here, I can tell you there is a little scene of children playing a game, there's a couple of women having a fight, there is a man picking up his hat that has blown away, there is a windmill doing what windmills do, completely oblivious to the drama in the centre of the painting.

I am showing you this painting for a reason. It has to do with what we are hearing in this series of sermons about “Jesus’ Final Week.” There are seven addresses in all. Each one on a different aspect, a different sound bite, if you like, of that last week of the life on earth of Jesus Christ.

And each of us preachers, charged with the responsibility of saying something useful for the building up of the faithful, have to pick out of our topic, a couple of points worth emphasising. A couple of little sound bites.

Now the danger is of two kinds. One danger is that you, the listeners will, between yawns, just hear one or two things that excite you. And we’ll forget the rest. We’ll sit for a half hour or so while one of us drones on up here. And maybe if the Holy Spirit is strong enough, just one idea, might hit home. And usually it will be something that we agree with, or we think is important, or more true than everything else the preacher was going on about. I know what it’s like. I sit in those pews too.

But there’s another danger, and it is of my making. I have to decide what I am going to say on the topic. In half an hour. Or less. Much less now that I’ve rabbited on about the news and Bruegel paintings for so long.

And the danger here is that you might think that what gets said up here is (a) the only thing worth saying, or worse (b) all there is to say on the topic.

Friends, our faith is a very big painting. With a lot of detail. If all of it were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written.

So, I urge you to place all that we are hearing over these seven weeks into the larger context of our faith. Let us not fixate on the minutiae of our faith, but allow ourselves to accept the mystery of the things that we find strange or difficult and hold them in tension with the ideas that resonate with our logical minds or our warmed hearts.

So that’s point one. Let’s **keep the big picture in view** as we listen to these seven addresses.

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So, I am given to speak on the topic of Jesus last meal. And I only want to say a few things. Maybe not the most important, but things about this event that I have found interesting and worth exercising our minds about.

All Christians are theologians. Or we should be. God came to take away our sin, not to take away our minds. So I like the challenge of ideas that require a bit of brainwork.

So the others ideas I want to think about aloud this morning are two in number.

First, I want to think about the relationship between the meal that Jesus has with his disciples and the Jewish tradition of the Passover.

And second, I want to think about the way the writers of the Gospel have structured the story and why they might have structured the story in the way they have.

I guess you all do realise that this last meal that Jesus has with his disciples is meant to be the Jewish Passover meal. This is a traditional meal within the Jewish religion. It commemorates God’s deliverance of the Jews from Egypt.

Doubtless you remember how the story goes. The Jews are slaves in Egypt because they migrated there in the time of Joseph. But then Pharaohs arose who knew not Joseph, and the Jews became slaves. In other words, they were treated just like many foreign groups are treated in our world today. The foreigners end up getting the jobs that the locals don’t want to do, and they become an underclass within society. Well, something like that happened to the Jews and they ended up the slave class.

Then along comes Moses and he tries to persuade the Pharaoh to let his people go. God sends a bunch of plagues on Egypt, but the Pharaoh is strangely non-compliant. Finally, God kills off the first-born of every family. Except for the Jews who are instructed to paint some lamb’s blood around their doors as a sign to God that this house is to be passed over. Hence the name Passover. And hence the idea of the sacrificial lamb. The lamb is sacrificed as a substitute for the first-born of the family.

Most of us don't have too much difficulty in seeing that Jesus is representing himself as the new lamb-that-was-slain. The lamb is sacrificed in the Passover celebration and is eaten by the family along with bread made without yeast.

And Jesus hands the bread to his disciples and says "this is my body." And when he hands the wine around he says "this is my blood."

But there is something else going on here that is harder for us to see right away. And that is the degree to which Jesus is **changing history**.

You see, we don't have the advantage that the early Christians would have had. We don't have behind us a whole tradition of going through the motions of the Passover meal every year.

The writers of the Gospels wanted their audience to know that history changed at this point. Something new had broken into the world. And the world could never be the same again. The old traditions were now seriously old. Out of date. Replaced.

Apart from the parallels between the Lamb and Jesus, and between the bread and wine and what Jesus says about them, there are some other really interesting clues in the text that show us just how clear Matthew is trying to convince his readers that the old Passover is gone. It has now been replaced by something new. That history has changed.

First, Matthew is careful to tell us the time. Did you notice this?

In verse 20 it says "when evening came." That means when the sun goes down. I don't think they had watches in those days, so we can presume this is how you said "about six o'clock" in those days.

Now the Jewish Passover went about three hours. And it finished with the singing of a hymn. So, right on cue at about 9 o'clock we read in verse 30 "when they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives."

Some Bible scholars even more fond of literary criticism than me have shown that there are eight three-hour events over the 24 hours from the beginning of the Last Supper. At the end of the 8th three-hour segment Jesus is buried. It's almost like there is a program here. A schedule. Or, actually, a liturgy.

Why? Well, it may seem strange to us, but not to any family who had been celebrating the Passover meal every year. It would be as clear as day that the Gospel writers were saying, not just once, but eight times over, that the old religion, the old liturgy, the old celebrations, we now gone. A new thing was happening in the world.

And what is that new thing? It is the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. Not some future event. Not something to wait for through a millennium (although to take the big picture view, we need to see that there is something called the Second Coming). So perhaps we should say, not only something for the end times, but something for the **here and now**.

The Kingdom of God is a fact. Today. It's been a fact for 2000 years.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, in a book called "The Gospel in a Pluralist Society" points us to the instructions that Jesus gave to the disciples in John's gospel. It's in the 14th chapter if you want to check this out with me.

Jesus is talking, appropriately I think, to Philip. And Philip asks, in verse 8, "show us the father." And Jesus replies "Anyone who has seen me, has seen the father." And he goes on to say what that means. It means that the Kingdom of God is fully revealed in Jesus. Fully revealed.

Bishop Newbigin says "there has been a decisive and complete revelation of God in the particular event of Jesus' ministry."

But wait, that's just one sound bite. There's more.

In verse 16 Jesus says he will send the "Counsellor" – the Greek word is *paraclete* which means the one who speaks for another. An advocate, if you like.

So, even though the Kingdom of God is a fact, there is still work to do in understanding and learning what that means. The Spirit of God will be our teacher, interpreter and advocate.

And in that idea, lies our call to mission. My call. Your call, to live a Kingdom life in the here and now.

Sure, there might be pie in the sky when you die, but there's still work to be done while you're still around, on the ground. I borrowed that from an African-American preacher we heard once in Wollongong.

And, in case we still don't get it, there is a message right here in the last meal together. And it has to do with what Jesus does with the bread and the wine.

What does he do?

Well, on the face of it, nothing unusual. He breaks the bread and hands it out. He puts wine in the cup and hands it around. I think in the Passover tradition you share four cups of wine, a tradition I would think is open to some abuse.

Anyway, no abuse here. Jesus shares one loaf and one cup. But is that what he is sharing? Bread and wine?

No. He makes it clear that these elements represent something. They represent Him.

He says, this is my body. And he gives it away.

He says, this is my blood. And he gives it away.

Jesus transforms the Passover meal into a challenge to mission. A challenge to all of us in the church to live in the spirit and life of the Kingdom of God that he revealed, sometimes in absolute contradiction to the fundamental beliefs of the world.

Back in John chapter 16 and verse 8 Jesus says that this paraclete, counsellor, comforter, will "convict the world of its guilt." If we are to live in the here and now reality of God's revelation in Jesus, we have a mission in the world.

How should we then live?

Well, Ken told us last week. Be personally prepared in the here and now. Be connected to Jesus. Seek first the Kingdom of God. Live a Christlike life. Overflow with love and compassion.

Ah, I think that's another part of the big picture. Or as Jesus says in John 16:12 "I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now."

So, I'll save more for another time. A-men