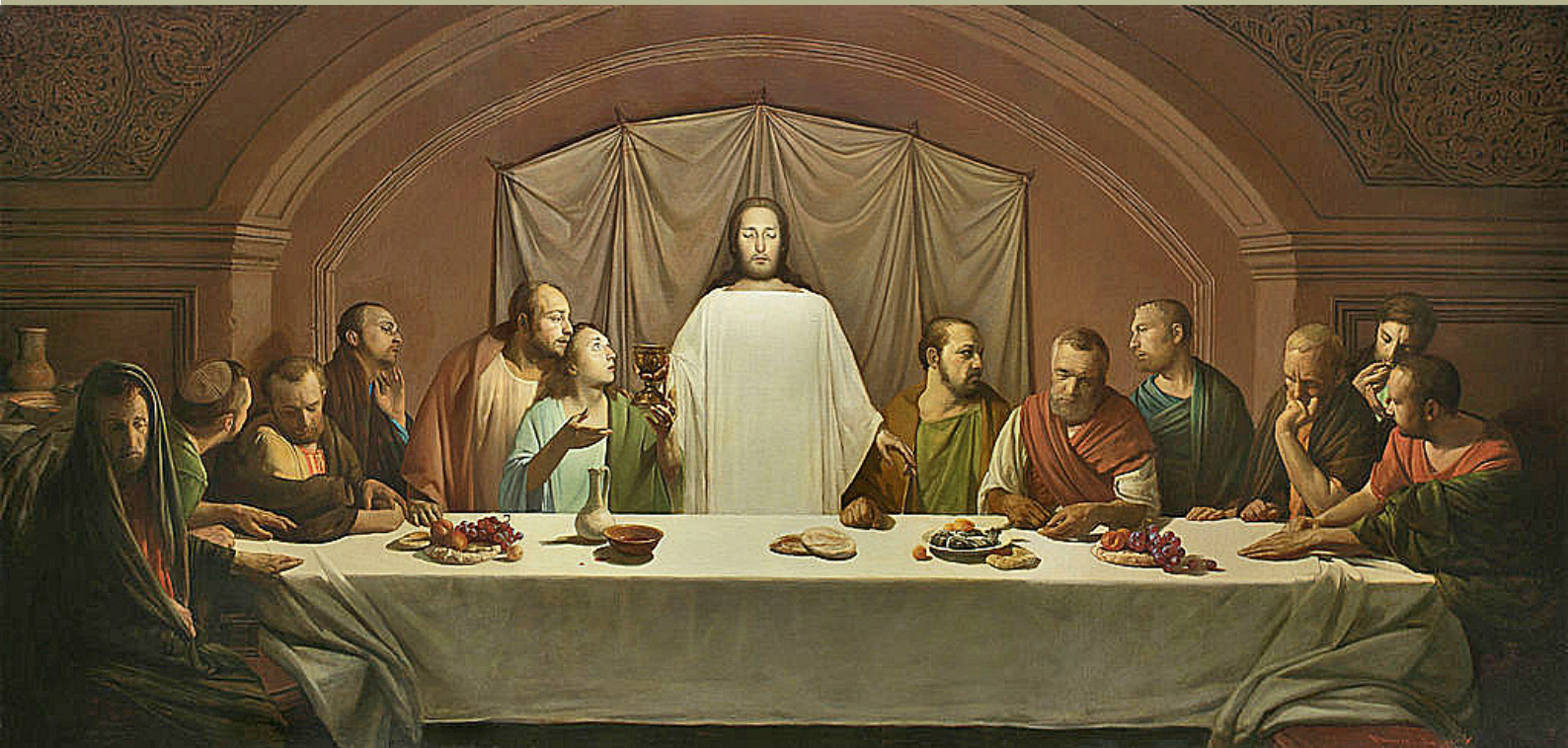


Walking with Jesus



Five Bible Studies for Lent

John Birch

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Cover picture: The Last Supper, Andrey Mironov, 2009 (used with permission)

Introduction

Easter is at the heart of the Christian faith and its most important festival, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his death – three days that changed the world. The basic story is familiar not only to those who call themselves Christians and many who do not but picked up the basics through education or as a child taken to church. However, the days leading up to and beyond the Cross are, in the gospel stories, busy ones for Jesus and his followers. There is a potentially dangerous journey to make to Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations and a waiting Cross and later, following the Resurrection, another from Jerusalem to Emmaus. In-between are several incidents and opportunities for Jesus to teach that are maybe not so well known but important in the bigger picture. On our own journey through Lent it is a good time to see how these stories, big and small, shared by the writers of the gospels, feed into our understanding of who Jesus is and what Easter means for us.

The Gospels:

As we journey through the eyes of four writers, it is worth recalling briefly who they were originally writing for.

Mark, a friend of Peter, wrote the shortest and earliest gospel (c. AD64) and was writing with a Roman audience in mind.

Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, and referenced the Old Testament over 100 times, emphasising Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

Luke, a doctor, historian, and non-Jew, was writing mainly to a Gentile audience, and there is an emphasis on the marginalised.

John took a different approach, beginning with echoes of Genesis, and introducing Jesus as one who will bring a new creation. Jesus uses the same 'I am' that Moses heard from the burning bush in his conversation with God.

Approaching Jerusalem (Mark's story)

Study One



The Transfiguration, Pietro Perugino, c1500

Opening Chat...

If you were contemplating a pilgrimage, or even visiting a religious site you have not yet been to, where would the destination be and why?

Key verses...

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant. (Mark 9:9-10)

Hoping for the positive...

(Read Mark 9:2-32)

One issue we have when reading a Bible passage is understanding what it was like for the characters involved, and here is a case in point, as this journey of faith the disciples are taking with Jesus approaches a point of climax in Jerusalem. What was it like to accompany Jesus on a walk up a mountain and suddenly have a vision of Elijah and Moses conversing with him? What was it like when a crowd appears, expecting demons to be driven out from a young boy as Jesus did recently, but then gets agitated and argumentative when his disciples fail to do the same?

The problem is that we have the historical record in front of us, whereas they are in the thick of it and unclear what happens next. Faced with Moses and Elijah, Peter does not think much

further than here are three important people who need a tent to meet under. The vision that God gave was more likely one of Moses, the lawgiver, and a famous prophet presenting Jesus as the one to whom they had long pointed. To emphasise this, God takes Moses and Elijah away and leaves Jesus alone with the words, 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' - which echoes words from Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

Then Jesus talks of 'rising from the dead' and Elijah having come as a precursor to the Messiah (through John the Baptist) and the disciples' confusion deepens, and these clouds would hang over them and only clear after the resurrection.

Down from the mountain we glimpse some of Jesus' own frustrations,

knowing his time on earth is short. Can you picture that moment as the crowd look for, at the very least, a magic trick from the disciples and are disappointed? Can you feel the raw emotion in Jesus' cry, 'O unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you?'

Was Jesus directing his words to the crowd or the disciples? His response to the disciples' questions after the exorcism points to their lack of faith (see also Matthew 17:20).

There was a need for time out. Jesus needed to teach his disciples without the usual distractions of an expectant crowd.

So, walking through Galilee Jesus explains that someone will betray him into the hands of those who want to take his life. He will die, but after three days he will rise again to life. There is no discussion, as the disciples are possibly afraid to know any more!

Discussion...

- 1: Why might Jesus have selected only Peter, James, and John to accompany him up the mountain and experience the Transfiguration?
- 2: After coming down the mountain, is Jesus harsh to include the disciples in his rebuke to an 'unbelieving generation'?
- 3: The disciples could do nothing for the boy possessed by an evil spirit, even though the power to do so was given by Jesus and they had used it successfully (Mark 6:7,13). Jesus responds by telling them this kind can only come out by prayer (or fasting). Is this an inferred criticism that they were taking such power for granted, or something else?
- 4: Confusion and misunderstanding are throughout this passage. How easy is it to empathise with the disciples, or should they have put two and two together by now?

A little clarity...

(Read Mark 10:32-52)

It should not have been a surprise to anyone close to Jesus that the road they were travelling would lead both to death and resurrection because Jesus had hinted at what lay ahead, but experiencing this first-hand was not easy.

Here, Jesus is more explicit in telling them the Jewish leaders would be responsible for his death, but at the hand of the Gentiles who would mock him, spit on him, and flog him prior to execution.

The reaction of two of his disciples shows a complete misunderstanding of what is about to happen. James and John are looking forward to joining Jesus in a Messianic

kingdom they passionately believe is just over the horizon, hence their desire to sit either side of him in his glory. Jesus offers no such commitment, but continues his teaching, telling them that better than seeking power is a willingness to suffer for his sake. In fact, both these disciples would suffer for their faith; James killed by the sword and John exiled to Patmos.

You don't find true greatness, says Jesus, in the way Gentile rulers lord it over their people, or occupying seats at the top table, but in humble service – a great paradox of the kingdom of God that the disciples had yet to grasp.

And then, just fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem, there is a glimmer of hope as they walk through Jericho along a pilgrimage trail towards the Feast of Passover, and a blind beggar calls to Jesus as 'Son of David', a messianic title.

The crowds try to silence him, but Jesus hears his cries, calls to him and asks that all-important question, 'What do you want me to do for you?' the same one that he asked James and John.

They wanted power, and earlier a rich man had requested eternal life (verse 17), but Bartimaeus had only one request, 'Rabbi, I want to see!'

The Jews understood there to be a connection between salvation and physical wholeness, and in this miracle, we see both healing and salvation as Bartimaeus follows Jesus along the road to Jerusalem.

Discussion...

- 5: The only one sure of what will happen over the next few days is Jesus and yet his work, particularly with the disciples, is not over. How easy do you find it to put bad news to the back of your mind and carry on as normal, and are there coping mechanisms?
- 6: James and John, on their own or accompanied by their mother (Matthew 20:20ff) have an awkward question to ask Jesus. This could be a proud Mum wanting the best for her sons, or their own ambitions, but what is so wrong about it?
- 7: How does Jesus' question to Bartimaeus feed into our thoughts about prayer?

A welcome and a challenge...

(Read Mark 11:1-33)

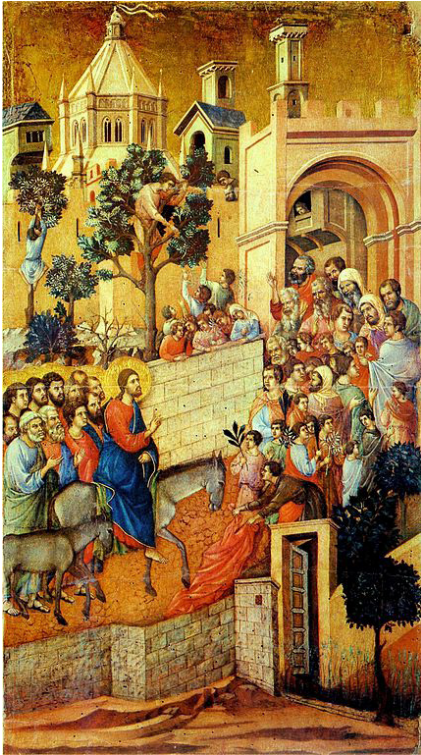
The nearer he gets to his destination the more open Jesus becomes in declaring his messiahship. There is less time for teaching, speaking in parables and trying to get his followers to understand who he is and what their response should be. So now there will be a very public entrance into Jerusalem, one which will fulfil a prophesy (Zechariah 9:9) of Jerusalem's king coming 'righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey'.

There was already a steady stream of people entering through the city gates for the Passover Feast, many of whom would have heard of Jesus, maybe even witnessed the miracle of Bartimaeus being given his sight, and were following him into the city wondering what might happen there. They

may still be expecting a different Messiah, a military king, but they welcome Jesus into the city in the traditional manner, with cloaks and branches spread on the ground before him. The song they sing is not only one of welcome, as 'Blessed is he who comes' is part of the Hallel sung at all Jewish religious festivals, particularly Passover, and in this context has real messianic implications, with Mark adding the line about the kingdom promised to David's Son (Psalm 118:26).

Mark adds something else that might be one of Peter's memories, that just as the day was drawing to a close Jesus made a thorough inspection of the temple courts and buildings, acting as someone who had the authority to do so, before overnighting in Bethany.

Maesta Duccio, detail, Christ entering Jerusalem, 1308



On the walk back into Jerusalem there is the encounter with a fig tree (a familiar Old Testament picture of the Jewish nation), abundant with leaves (which suggested fruit) but barren and therefore cursed by a hungry Jesus for promising much and delivering nothing – a reference to the current spiritual state of the nation.

Then it is into the temple courts and for the second time Jesus (John 2:14-16) directs his anger to those who are showing irreverence for the temple and exploiting those coming to pray. We are told that the chief priests and teachers of the law were afraid to act because of the enthusiasm of the crowd, but later they corner Jesus in the temple courts and question him about authority. What gives him the right to say and do these things?

But Jesus wants them to work that out for themselves, and though they may well have already done that in their minds, they are not prepared to admit it in public. Fear, which will influence their next move, has silenced them.

Discussion...

- 8: Jesus seemed very keen to connect his life and mission with ancient prophesy. Why?
- 9: The fig tree promised much but did not deliver. It was a picture for its time, but is it relevant for the Church in any age?
- 10: The disciples struggled earlier with a healing, and in verse 24 of our reading, Jesus says of prayer, 'Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe you have received it, and it will be yours'. How easy is that in your experience?
- 11: The people welcoming Jesus sang familiar and well-loved words. What is your favourite hymn or song for Lent and Easter?

For prayer...

Remember at this time prayer all those who live in fear of persecution for their faith

Questions and signs (Luke's story)

Study Two



Marten van Valckenborch, Parable of the wicked husbandmen, c1585

Opening Chat...

What influences your charitable giving, and what might deter you from giving to a particular cause?

Key verse...

'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away,'
(Luke 21:33)

Going undercover...

(Read Luke 20:9-26)

Luke's narrative takes off from where Mark left us, with the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law trying to get Jesus to state where his authority came from. They were afraid to admit the truth and say nothing, so Jesus turns to the people gathered around and tells a story, a parable aimed directly at the temple leaders, as it not only affirms Jesus' authority but also hints toward his coming death.

It is a parable that adapts 'The song of the vineyard' from Isaiah 5, a folk song about a beautifully created vineyard which should have given a yield of excellent quality grapes, but only produced a useless crop. Jesus' listeners no doubt enjoyed the story until he revealed the vineyard to be Israel, the owner God, and his son, Jesus. The tenants are the

religious leaders whose task is to cultivate the religious life of Israel (which they are failing to do), and the servants in the story are the prophets whose word was so often ignored.

In his closing remarks, Jesus takes another well-known passage and applies it to himself. The message is plain, that by rejecting him they are rejecting God's only way of Salvation. Jesus can be a stepping-stone or a stumbling stone, a choice everyone must make, but not the answer they want to hear!

So, what do the temple leaders do? They keep a watchful eye on Jesus, but according to Luke go a step further by sending in undercover agents to not only spy on him but attempt to infiltrate his closest followers, looking for Jesus to say enough to convict himself. Their

question is an attempt to divert Jesus onto the greater political question of Roman rule. No-one liked Tax collectors or paying tax, so should they really be giving their money to Caesar? A wrong answer and they could hand Jesus to the Roman authorities and wipe their hands of him.

But Jesus makes a valid point for all citizens. That they have Roman coins in their pockets shows a tacit acceptance of any such claims by the occupying powers. Only God is worthy of worship, but just because they have a

relationship with God does not mean that they are above the demands of the secular state and its many responsibilities, including the welfare of its citizens, which requires taxation. Paul was clear about this, saying that the authorities are God's servants who give their time to governing, and we should give to everyone that which we owe them (Romans 13:6,7).

Discussion...

- 1: Jesus' parable about the vineyard is all about a failure to recognise the importance of the prophets of the past, including John the Baptist, in the bigger story of God's purposes. What is it that his hearers had missed, and could we be guilty of the same?
- 2: Thinking about that stone the builders rejected, how can Jesus be a stumbling stone to those looking for answers to the big questions in life?
- 3: So, what is your own view on taxation?
- 4: Jesus talks of giving to God what is God's. How does that impact on our daily life?

The questions keep coming...

(Read Luke 20:27-47)

Among Jesus' opponents were the Pharisees and Sadducees, and it is worth recapping on these two groups. The Pharisees (meaning 'separated ones') were a small Jewish sect (around 6,000 strong) mainly remembered for their strict adherence to the finer points of the law, frequent clashes with Jesus, and in the past being criticised by him for being hypocrites.

The Sadducees only accepted the authority of the first five books of Scripture and denied all things supernatural. They were a small but wealthy sect, and in Herod's day had control of the temple. The Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection, the Sadducees did

not. The two groups had almost nothing in common other than their opposition to Jesus. John the Baptist had called them 'a brood of vipers' awaiting judgement, which must have hurt those who considered God's anger was mainly for Gentiles and not Jews.

So, the Sadducees look for a flaw in the concept of resurrection with a rather hypothetical example of a woman whose many husbands, all brothers, keep dying, and therefore whose wife will she be at the resurrection? Jesus' answer, a little complex at first reading, asks them to consider two things. Firstly, they are thinking in earthly terms and there is no marriage in heaven.

Secondly, even the very books that underpin their faith testify to life after death. 'He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive' (v. 38). It is an answer approved by some of the teachers of the law, happy to see Sadducees losing their argument.

Jesus then turns the tables on his inquisitors with a question of his own based upon the scriptures they know well and concerning the

identity of the Messiah, which to the Jews meant 'the Son of David'. Luke does not record any reaction, other than Jesus turning his back on his accusers and turning toward the gathered crowd to denounce the scribes (and Pharisees, according to Matthew 12:38-40) for being like the fig tree that he had previously cursed – promising much and delivering so little of value.

Discussion...

- 5: The gospel narratives show that religious leaders struggled to understand Jesus and what he was saying and doing. Was it that, or had they grown too comfortable in their positions of power and felt threatened?
- 6: The Pharisees and Sadducees seem poles apart, and yet they both worshipped God. Thinking about the variety of churches in your area (not just denominations), how well do you understand their way of 'doing worship' for instance, and would it be helpful to know more?
- 7: The last few verses of this section are about power. Consider for a few moments those who hold the most senior positions in your denomination. How difficult can occupying such a post be, and why?

Looking for signs...

(Read Luke 21:1-38)



Peter Paul Rubens, The tribute money, c1612

We are still in the temple where Jesus was throughout the day, teaching an enthusiastic crowd (v.38) before finding solitude in the evening outside Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives.

At the end of chapter 20, Jesus talks of the teachers of the law taking advantage of widows whilst making lengthy prayers. Now he looks up and contrasts the rich to a widow putting their offerings into the 'temple treasury'. Even though her gift was small, it was far more of a sacrificial offering than that given by the wealthy.

It is not the amount given that is the measure of the offering; but the amount left afterwards.

This leads to a lengthy warning about what is coming and advice about being prepared, known as the 'apocalyptic discourse, also in Mark and Matthew's gospels. The temple was a huge and very solid structure, a symbol of the Jewish religion and glittering with Herodian splendour, so to talk about its destruction was unthinkable. No wonder the disciples want more information.

So, what do we have here, the words of Jesus at a moment in time or a collection of his quotes about this subject, collated by Luke, Mark, and Matthew?

We know Luke as a historian, and it may well be that he had his own accurate summary of Jesus' words in the temple. There are differences in the three gospels, but we could summarise the information shared with the disciples as follows:

1. Do not follow false Messiahs (v.8).
2. Do not get too anxious about what is happening around the world (vv.9-11).
3. If you find yourself in court because of your faith, then God will be there with you (vv.12-15).
4. Even if everyone turns against you, stand firm in your faith (vv.17-19).
5. Get out of Jerusalem before the situation gets critical (vv.20-24).
6. Once the final apocalyptic events start, know that your salvation is close (vv.25-28)
7. When you see the signs, recognise them for what they are, the kingdom of God drawing near (vv.29-31)
8. Whatever happens, the Lord's words endure (vv.32-33)
9. Watch, pray and live a life that is pleasing to God (vv.34-36)

Jesus' use of the word 'generation' in verse 32 could mean the decades after his life (which would include the destruction of Jerusalem), or a more general span of time within which all these things will happen. Mark gives no time limit, and both he and Luke caution against taking anything for granted. Be watchful and prayerful is the key!

Discussion...

- 8: Is our offering to God all about our monetary wealth, or is there more to it than that?
- 9: Jesus is just a short time away from betrayal and arrest and still spending most of his time in the temple teaching. If you try for just a moment to put yourself in his place, what do you think was going through Jesus' mind?
- 10: In verses 25-28 Jesus speaks of various 'signs', in the sky and on the land. How do they speak to you?

For prayer...

Pray for all those who feel a call from God for full or part-time mission work or ministry, that they might be blessed in the offering of their lives in God's service

The Last Supper (Matthew's story)

Study Three



Mary Anoints Jesus, Ilyas Basim Khuri Bazzi Rahib, 1684

Opening Chat...

How well do you cope with stress and have you found ways of dealing with situations causing symptoms of stress that work for you?

Key verse...

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'
(Matthew 26:26)

The plot against Jesus ...

(Read Matthew 26:1-16)

Matthew provides a bit of a timeline here in telling us that Passover is two days away, which would make this Tuesday evening and the end of a long teaching session with the disciples on the Mount of Olives. In Matthew's presentation we have Jesus, the Messiah, Son of Man, Judge of all (Matthew 16:27) facing judgement. He has already told the disciples that his time on earth is short and he faces arrest and death, and now reveals that it will be during the Passover celebrations.

But this will be a voluntary sacrifice that the Apostle Paul later recognised when calling Jesus 'our Passover lamb'. The leaders, including the High Priest Caiaphas, dare not act now, worried about the increasing popularity of Jesus. God is in control.

So, we find Jesus in the home of Simon the Leper and being anointed by Mary (identified in John's gospel) with an expensive jar of perfume. Both Mark and John tell us that this was an extract of nard, not a typical oil used around the house (as we might expect a fragrant

candle) but more for solemn occasions such as funerals. The disciples recognise the perfume for its worth and question what seems to them to be a poor use of a valuable item (a year's salary for the average worker).

Judas is the one who articulates their thoughts – that she could have sold this and given the money to the poor rather than poured over Jesus' head and feet.

We are not told about Mary's motives, but perhaps she has heard rumours from friends in Jerusalem about the possible fate of Jesus and wants to create a special moment.

This is an act of love, of worship and sacrifice from Mary, thankful for what he has done for their family and for who she believes him to be. Jesus appreciates this action as one full of significance, the beginning of preparations for his funeral.

The decision of Judas to betray Jesus is probably the only incident that occurs on the Wednesday of Holy Week. This man was one

of Jesus' closest followers, being trained to become leaders of the church, but now he indulges in treachery.

the value Judas now places on Jesus. His motives are unclear, but the act ensures his place in history.

The amount of money that changes hand is not huge, the price of a slave gored to death by an ox (Exodus 21:32), which perhaps shows

Discussion...

- 1: Could Jesus have done any more to prepare his disciples for what was about to happen? Based on your own understanding of the story to this point in time, what had they seen Jesus do and say?
 - 2: Do the disciples have a point in their response to Mary's use of the perfume, and how would you see yourself acting in a similar, if hypothetical, situation?
 - 3: So, what might have been going through the mind of Judas?
-

Supper together...

(Read Matthew 26:17-30)

What do we need to do if planning to share a meal with friends? This is Passover, and the requirements are anything but simple. Toward mid-afternoon on the Thursday sacrificial lambs would be taken to the temple court.

After sunset households would gather in a house to eat the Passover lamb, roasted with bitter herbs. There would be a thanksgiving for the day and the wine, a preliminary course of greens and bitter herbs, followed by an explanation of

the symbolic meal, singing, a second cup of wine, then the main course followed by a third 'cup of blessing' accompanied by prayer, singing and probably a fourth cup of wine.

So, the disciples head into the city at Jesus' request to find the man chosen to be their host, and from there, to begin their preparations in a room in his house. Come sunset, we find Jesus



Simon Ushakov, Last Supper, 1685

reclining at the table with the twelve and whilst they eat, he drops the bombshell that one of those around the table will betray him! Jesus' choice of this moment, with his closest friends gathered in fellowship, only emphasises the enormity of the betrayal and causes much distress. There is an inevitability in the death of Jesus, but that does not excuse the action of Judas.

The words 'this is my body' accompanying the breaking of bread by Jesus are not part of the Passover ritual, but would grow in understanding after Easter. They speak of sacrifice.

As the bread is broken, so the body of Jesus will be broken. We can say the same for the

sharing of the cup, with the fermented grape juice resembling the blood pouring from the Passover lambs in the temple. Jesus equates this spilling of blood with the word 'covenant', showing his understanding of how his life and death connect with the prophetic words of the past (Exodus 24:8, Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The first Passover meal was about hope of deliverance and a promised land. Jesus' words are also about hope of deliverance and life in the kingdom of God.

Following the traditional hymn at the end of the meal, they get up from the table and make their way to the Mount of Olives.

Discussion...

- 4: What does verse 18 tell you about Jesus?
- 5: The ritual of the Passover meal was familiar to the disciples. Are there particular meals that can remind you of times gone by, and emotionally, what does the remembrance bring?
- 6: What can the act of sharing a meal together around a table with family or friends offer that a TV dinner perhaps cannot?
- 7: How easy do you find the sharing of bread and wine at communion enables you to think about the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples, and if you had a say in such matters, would you like to do it differently?

A place called Gethsemane ...

(Read Matthew 26:31-46)

Jesus does not want the disciples to face what is about to happen without some preparation. The failure of the Twelve to stop Judas shows that even at that moment they had not taken in what was to happen, perhaps thinking that Jesus would use his supernatural powers to save himself. But Jesus knows it is going to be a dark and potentially dangerous situation that they will find themselves in, and he

wants them to understand that although they all run away, that will not prevent him from 'going ahead of them' and waiting for them in Galilee after he has risen. There is genuine shock among the disciples at these words. They are still in denial about the approaching danger and Peter receives a stern warning that in the next few hours even he will deny Jesus three times.

Gethsemane was a garden with olive trees and olive presses, located somewhere on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. It was one of Jesus' favourite spots when he wanted to be alone. However, this time he takes three of his closest disciples with him, perhaps so they might learn something of the depths of suffering he was about to experience.

Jesus could have chosen somewhere different that night to foil the plans of Judas, but he chose not to walk away from the fate that awaited him.

Jesus asks them to stay awake, perhaps so they might also spend time in prayerful support or be on lookout duty. Then he goes a little further so he can be alone with his heavenly Father, only to return and find all the disciples asleep. But there is no anger in his words, just a recognition of the trials they are going to have to face over the next few days.

'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'



Agony in the garden, Andrea Mantegna, 1455

Discussion...

- 8: What must the disciples have gone through emotionally during that meal?
- 9: Could Jesus not have presented himself to the authorities in the morning and saved a lot of heartache and trouble for his followers?
- 10: Can you feel the emotion in Gethsemane as you read the story? Perhaps rather than answering a question here, you might like to spend a few moments prayerfully thinking and responding to what you have read.

For prayer...

Pray for all whose hearts are burdened by anxiety and fear, for themselves and others, that they might find healing and peace.

Arrest & crucifixion (John's story)

Study Four



Giotto Scrovegni, *The Kiss of Judas*, 1305

Opening Chat...

Not a simple question for the start of a meeting, but where do you stand on the concept of the death penalty as punishment for wrongdoing in today's world?

Key verses...

The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write "The King of the Jews", but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'
(John 19:21,22)

Jesus arrested...

(Read John 18:1-40)

In the previous study we left Jesus and his disciples in Gethsemane, and now pick up the story as John tells it, and immediately we find Judas is missing, this being his opportunity to hasten a moment of betrayal.

The soldiers may have already been to the house where the Last Supper was shared, before moving on to Jesus' favourite spot in the garden. Whether a whole detachment of soldiers was necessary we are not told, but the temple authorities seem to have engaged the services of the local garrison in arresting Jesus.

John emphasises that at the moment of his arrest Jesus is very keen to protect his disciples, telling the soldiers twice that it is he, and he alone that they need to take, echoing a promise made earlier, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day' (John 6:39). They bring Jesus to Annas, a respected leader, possibly an expert in religious matters, prior to an early morning

appearance before members of the Jewish tribunal.

Peter and an unnamed disciple follow at a distance and gain access to the high priest's courtyard, and it's here, warming his hands by a fire, that Peter denies being a disciple not once but three times, as previously prophesied by Jesus. As this is happening, Jesus is undergoing a very physical interrogation before being sent bound to Caiaphas the high priest and onward to Pilate.

This is the longest account of the trial in the four gospels. The others deal mainly with legal matters, whereas John is more interested in Jesus' concern about Pilate and the difficult position he finds himself in. It is more of an interview than a trial, which emphasises the lack of a suitable crime for which Pilate might order an execution, because there is no evidence that Jesus poses a danger to Roman rule. But Pilate is also a politician. This awkward situation needs a satisfactory outcome, and Passover gives him that

opportunity with the custom of releasing a prisoner. Jesus seemed popular with people in the towns, so perhaps the way out would be to order the release of this so-called 'king of the Jews' after a simple thrashing?

But this crowd, drawn together specially by the priests, rejects that approach and call for the release of Barabbas, and the death of Jesus.

Discussion...

- 1: What do verses 6-8 say to you about Jesus and his accusers?
 - 2: John gives us a window into the character of Peter in verses 15-18 and 25-27. How does the disciple come across to you?
 - 3: Pilate struggles to understand who Jesus is and what has brought him to this place. Jesus said to him, 'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me,' to which Pilate answers, 'What is truth?' How would you answer that question, if asked?
-

Sentenced to death...

(Read John 19: 1-16)

Once more it is almost as if it is Pilate at the centre of this story than Jesus as John paints a picture of a Roman governor keen to see that justice is not steamrollered away, but not at the expense of losing his job or worse. Whilst he can find no reason to declare Jesus guilty of anything deserving crucifixion, the comments of the Jewish leaders that to fail them was to label himself as 'no friend of Caesar' was a real threat to Pilate. Anyone calling themselves a king, as Jesus had done, was potentially a rival to Caesar.

It was becoming clear that if Jesus was released, then the high priest would send a report to Rome saying Pilate had refused to bring a potential rival to justice, and maybe was plotting a new alliance. That would lose Pilate his career, and with Tiberius as emperor it would almost certainly lose him his life.

To Jesus, this is a question of power. He understands the political pressure Pilate feels but sees him as an instrument of God's purposes, the actual guilt being with those who have manipulated the whole legal process and brought him to this place. In his conversations with Pilate, there is the opportunity for Jesus to reveal more about himself and the kingdom of God, but Pilate chooses what he considers is the safest path to follow. So, he presents the bleeding, bruised and suffering Jesus to the crowd as their king, to which the Jewish leaders respond, 'We have no king but Caesar.'



Mihaly Munkacsy, *Christ in front of Pilate*, 1881

The irony of the situation is obvious to John, as the Jews, who long for independence, put themselves on record as being content to be subjects of a pagan emperor. It seems like John's description of Jesus at the start of his gospel was being fulfilled as they handed him over for crucifixion.

'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not

recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.' (John 1:10-11)

The message John brings is that although Jesus died at the hands of Roman soldiers, it was the Jews who were primarily responsible for his death.

Discussion...

- 4: Why do you think the writer John spends so much time considering the role of Pilate at this moment in the story?
- 5: Politics plays a part in Jesus' trial and its outcome. How easily do politics and Church get on in our own generation?
- 6: What were the implications of the chief priests proclaiming, 'We have no king but Caesar'?

Crucifixion...

(Read John 19:17-42)

And so, they lead Jesus out to his crucifixion. Normal practice was for the condemned person, accompanied by four legionnaires and a centurion, to carry the horizontal beam of the cross along with a placard displaying their name and crime. They walked from Pilate's judgement seat to a place outside the city called Golgotha where the crucifixion would take place.

There is no mention of the process itself, as early readers would have been all too aware of the immense cruelty in this method of execution, where the condemned person might hang onto life for up to thirty-six hours of increasing agony. The apostle Paul alludes to the cruelty of this practice when he says of Jesus, 'And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!' (Philippians 2:8)

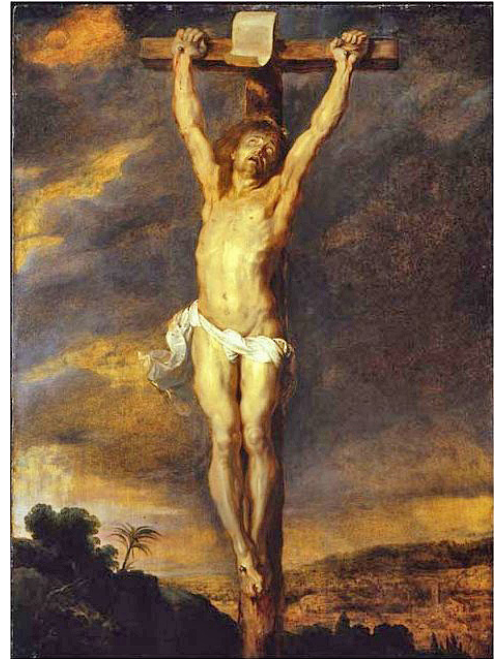
The message on the placard was in three languages so that all who passed by could see that they had crucified the king of the Jews as a common criminal. Pilate's refusal to amend this description at the chief priests' request is his final say on the matter, much to their annoyance.

As Jesus' clothes are shared and gambled over, we read that there were four particular women watching the tragedy take place; Mary, the wife of Clopas (who we know nothing of), Mary Magdalene (see Luke 8:2), the mother of Jesus and her sister (who was possibly the mother of James and John). Jesus hands over responsibility for his mother's welfare to a disciple thought to be John, who took her to his home in Jerusalem where she must have remained, as Acts tells us she was present at the pre-Pentecost prayer meeting (Acts 1:13).

Jesus' words before he dies, 'It is finished', signify the completion of his work, and in its context is a shout of triumph from the Cross. John gives us an eyewitness statement of the soldiers' actions in not breaking the legs of Jesus but using a spear instead to double-check that he was dead.

Burial would normally take place within twenty-four hours of death, so two friends intervene and take charge so that Jesus might have a proper burial, and the quantity of spices used shows the wealth of Nicodemus.

This was a courageous act, as it linked them publicly to Jesus. The grave was not in a public cemetery, but in a private garden, possibly just outside the city walls and easily accessible for the women after the Sabbath.



Peter Paul Rubens, Crucifixion, c1618-1620

Discussion...

- Even as Jesus hangs on the cross, there is argument over the wording on the placard nailed above his head, and the story switched briefly to Pilate again. What might John be saying to his readers?
- 7:
 - 8: Women feature throughout the gospel stories of Jesus. Mary Magdalene appears by name twelve times in the four gospels, more than most of the apostles. We find them in a supporting role, and drawn together at the death of Jesus, but do we acknowledge their true importance in the complete story?
 - 9: Most of the disciples had run away as they arrested Jesus, and Peter had already denied knowing him three times. Yet Jesus can cry out, 'It is finished!' which implies that all is in place for what happens next. What does that say about God's plans for our everyday lives?
 - 10: John describes Joseph of Arimathea as a 'secret disciple,' Mark calls him 'a prominent member of the Council waiting for the kingdom of God,' Matthew talks of 'a rich man,' and Luke 'a Council member who had not consented to their action'. How difficult can it sometimes be to openly admit to your faith?

For prayer...

Pray that the message of Easter this world hears is one of hope, that does not end with the fear of death but with the promise of life.

Resurrection (Luke's story)

Study Five



Opening Chat...

Have you ever been involved in organising or been the recipient of a surprise party, and if so, what were first thoughts as the secret was revealed?

Key verse...

They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'

(Luke 24:32)

Jesus has risen!

(Read Luke 24:1-12)

Luke misses a point which Matthew helps us with, in mentioning something resembling an earthquake causing the stone to roll away from the tomb entrance, and the Roman guards fleeing the scene at the sight of an angel and an empty tomb. Later, Matthew tells us the authorities bribed the guards to say the disciples had stolen the body (Matthew 28:11-15). The women, who included Mary Magdalene, were expecting to find the body of Jesus, having brought spices to finish anointing his body for burial. They did not expect the tomb to be empty.

The point that Luke seems to make in this passage is that no one, the disciples, the women or the religious leaders, having seen Jesus die on the cross and have a spear thrust in his side, was expecting the resurrection. Jesus had spoken of this, alongside the suffering and death that he must endure for the fulfilment of God's purposes. Yet to be

there, and see it all unfurl in front of their eyes had been so traumatic that, in their fear and sadness, no one had yet got beyond the point of grief, confusion and disbelief that it had happened.

The women listen to the words of the two angelic figures, who remind them of Jesus' own words, along with a mild rebuke for their confusion. Sometimes God speaks to us and we struggle to understand or accept what is being said, but we must have open minds and hearts to recognise when those words are being fulfilled. These things must happen, say the angels, and they are betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection. God will do what he says he will do, and the resurrection is hope for us too!

The other disciples, except for Peter, dismiss the women's testimony, which seems nonsense to them, but having learned the hard way of the dangers of ignoring Jesus'

word, Peter runs to the tomb and, seeing strips of linen, wonders what might have happened. Scholars have debated whether the words Luke uses implies faith, but consensus seems to place it rather as a 'first

step along the way of faith'. But Peter has learned a valuable lesson, twice, that Jesus means what he says.

Discussion...

- 1: Legally the witness of women was not acceptable in those days, but these were well-known followers and helpers of Jesus and the disciples, and their story is dismissed as nonsense according to Luke. How easy is it understand what was going through the minds of the Eleven, and others who heard their testimony?
- 2: Luke notes that there were two angels, Matthew mentions one who opened the tomb, and Mark writes of a young man dressed in a white robe. Quite often in the gospels we find differences in accounts of Jesus' life and words. What does that say to you and is it a good or a bad thing?
- 3: How does Luke's description of Peter (in verse 12) speak to you?

The road to Emmaus...

(Luke 24:13-32)

We do not know who the two disciples in this passage were, though it is possible that they were part of the large number of people who followed Jesus into Jerusalem for the Passover. They may well have been on the streets waving palm branches, welcoming Jesus into the city, and were now making their way home, confused at all that had taken place over the past few days. Luke brings Jesus into their conversation, and we are told that they did not, at this point on their journey, recognise him. There is a recurring theme of travel in Luke, with Jesus setting out for Jerusalem in chapter 9, and here the two followers are journeying to Emmaus from the same city. Later in Acts, the disciples will begin their own journeys from Jerusalem as part of their individual evangelistic missions to wherever God sends them.

The conversation begins with Jesus enquiring about what they were discussing, and they

are keen to confess their disappointment that everything they hoped for seemed to have gone hopelessly wrong. This great prophet Jesus, who was going to save Israel, was dead, executed, and although some women had returned from his tomb with news that it was empty and Jesus was alive, sadly none of the disciples had seen him. Which gives Jesus the opening to reveal to them how all this was part of the bigger picture, the fulfilment of so many prophetic words in Scripture concerning the Messiah.

He opens their minds to the truth, but this is purely educational until Jesus takes them up on the invitation to stay overnight, and in the sharing of a meal and the breaking of bread, their eyes open and they realise who this fellow traveller is, and why, like the famous Methodist preacher John Wesley in 1738 they could find their hearts 'strangely warmed' in encountering the risen Christ.

Discussion...

- 4: Look again at the initial response of these two disciples when questioned in verse 19 and what does it say about their understanding of Jesus?
 - 5: How important is it for us to understand the relationship between our Old and New Testaments, bearing in mind the response of Jesus in verse 27?
 - 6: At the end of this passage the evidence mounts up, not only from the two disciples but also from Simon, and hopes are rising again. How easy is it for us to piece together the evidence presented to us within the gospels and be convinced that Jesus is Messiah, crucified but risen from the dead?
-

Jesus appears to the disciples...

(Luke 24:33-53)



Luca Signorelli, *The Resurrected Christ*, 1514

This is now Luke's third Easter narrative. No one sees Jesus in the first, in the second it is only two disciples who see him, but now it is the Eleven as Jesus interrupts ongoing discussions with the two from Emmaus and their exciting news. It is not the resurrection that is at the centre of this passage but the physical proof that this surprise visitor is Jesus and not a ghost, confirmed in another shared meal.

Luke expands on the physical proof of Jesus' resurrection appearances in his later writings

where he tells us, 'After his suffering, (Jesus) presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.' (Acts 1:3-4).

That the disciples were both startled and frightened by the sudden appearance of Jesus is perhaps understandable, but it is one thing to be listening to someone describing their experience, another to see in front of you the truth of their words. And yet, they struggle

to believe that this is happening, and whilst Jesus does not invite them to pinch him to see it is true, he gives them the option of touching him and examining his hands and feet if they are still in doubt.

The disciples seem resigned to the resurrection not happening, maybe even thinking this is a hallucination. But then Jesus open their minds, as he did on the road to Emmaus, by revealing the fulfilment of Scripture in all that had happened. Right at the start of their mission training he had told them, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.' (Luke 9:22).

Now the mission to extend Jesus' message worldwide was going to be in their hands once they had received the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke's account of the Ascension is brief, not because he considers it to be of little interest, but because he will expand on its significance in the opening chapter of Acts. At the end of this gospel we are told that Jesus gave the disciples a priestly blessing before ascending to heaven, and we leave the disciples worshipping continually in the temple, praising God.

Discussion...

- 7: Luke does not include the story of Thomas within this encounter, which appears in John's gospel, but what is the point about Jesus that the writer wants to get across, and why is it so important to our faith?
- 8: Twice in the post-resurrection account Luke talks of the disciples having their minds or eyes opened so that they could understand the Scriptures. Is that something you have experienced and if so, how would you describe the moment?
- 9: We leave the disciples worshipping the risen Jesus. It took them a little time to get to this point. These are the people who will continue the work of Jesus in bringing the Good News to the world. Understanding their story can help us to do the same. How might that be?
- 10: The season of Lent has been a part of our Christian heritage possibly since AD 325 and the famous Council of Nicea. What is its importance in the 21st Century?

For prayer...

Pray for your neighbourhood, and that in which your Church is located, that the message of Easter heard within its walls might be lived and shown to those outside, through your words and actions.

Using the images...

There are quite a few images within these studies, and you may like to try this way to prayerfully use them.

It is called *Visio divina*, or 'Divine seeing' and all it requires is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at the images, what the artist might be saying, even putting ourselves into it, and allowing God to speak to us.

The four stages of *Visio divina*, assuming we are relaxed, quiet and with a copy of the picture in front of us, are as follows:

Here's an image you might like to practice with. The stages are the same.



1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colors, people, places and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.

2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?

3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.

4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

(The picture is by Pietro Di Giovanni D'Ambrogio, 'The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem', painted in 1440)

References...

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