

Passover in John 13

by Pastor Russell Bryan

The Communion Service - as a pastor my task is to make it new and relevant every time. This is very difficult. The service is steeped in tradition and many church members do not want to see the service done differently. For some, taking the service from Matthew 26 rather than 1 Corinthians 11 attacks their comfort zone.

If you have a large church there's the added problem of logistics - bread and wine to each person in as short a time as possible while maintaining decorum. Elders, Deacons and Deaconesses, each with their rehearsed roles to play and not a jot or tittle to be missed. Communion - just how do you make it more meaningful working within such constraints?

This was my very thought a couple of weeks ago as I was preparing for this quarter's service. Just for a change I started to read John 13. I thought I should emphasise Foot Washing - that Ordinance of Humility. While reading new thoughts entered my head. Of course we know this was a Passover meal Jesus was celebrating with his 12 closest disciples. And my first new thought was that of washing in the Passover Seder (the service at which the Passover meal is eaten).

I first took part in a Passover Seder about ten years ago, finding it both enlightening and a pleasure - all that food, not just a tiny glass and crumb of bread. Last year I had a Messianic Jew come and explain to my church how the Passover emblems relate to Jesus. Those experiences have shown me that there was much more happening at Jesus' Last Supper than is recorded in the gospels.

John 13 begins with the subject of love, as it ends too. It then moves into Jesus doing something out of the ordinary. Washing is part of a Passover Seder, coming after the first of four cups of wine. However, it is normally washing hands, not feet! In this context it's not so strange for Peter to ask, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Was Peter affronted by Jesus' change from tradition? "Hands, please!"

Other thoughts began to flood into my head. In John's gospel chapters 13 to 17 are placed in the context of a Passover Seder. Are they a commentary and reinterpretation of the Passover Seder by Jesus? To determine an answer to this question we would have to determine the presence of elements from the Seder in these chapters. Let's look and find out.

During Supper

If you're reading from a KJV or NKJV you will think that all of these chapters come after the Passover Meal. John 13:2 says, "supper being ended..." in both those translations. Of course the Greek could be translated that way but no other translation follows that line of thought. For example the RSV, NRSV, and NASB read, "during supper..."; the NIV reads, "the evening meal was being served...." The Greek doesn't mean that the eating of the meal was completed but rather the preparation for the meal. As we see in verse 26 the eating of the meal was still taking place so it couldn't possibly have been finished before verse 2.

Sanctification

The first cup of wine at a Passover Seder is drunk to celebrate Sanctification. God chooses Israel out of all other nations to be his own whom he loves and takes to be his own forever. Notice how John 13:1 compliments this thought, "Jesus... having loved his own who were in the world,

he loved them to the end." The idea of loving a unique group forever is clearly present in the Seder and John 13. Is Jesus reinterpreting who is Sanctified? For sure he is! - Israel is changed to "his own who were in the world."

Washing

As stated above washing is an important part of the Passover Seder - of hands not feet. In the Seder the washing was a necessary ritual that if you didn't participate in you couldn't proceed to complete the meal. By washing your hands you indicate your desire to continue to the next phase - eating and drinking. Jesus makes this point too with regard to the washing of feet, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (John 13:8) And also in verses 14 and 15, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." There was no going forward together without foot washing for Jesus and his disciples.

Peter seems a bit slow to understand the significance of what Jesus was doing. Having been told that he must have his feet washed (verse 8) Peter then blurts out, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

(verse 9) Peter thinks Jesus to be saying that we need a spiritual cleansing, as in Baptism, which is why he makes this remark. Jesus corrects this mistaken view by saying to Peter, "you are clean." (verse 10) Foot washing is thus not for spiritual cleansing, a mini-baptism. Jesus indicates that the ritual is to show humility and a willingness to serve (see verses 13-17).

Understanding

In Peter's discussion with Jesus about foot washing Jesus says to him, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." (verse 7) And later (verse 12) Jesus asks rhetorically, "Do you know what I have done to you?" Neither Peter nor the other disciples understood the full meaning of what Jesus was teaching them. But that didn't stop Jesus from allowing them to participate in the Passover Seder. What is clearly implied by Jesus is that understanding comes via practice (verses 14 and 15).

I often hear objections to children being allowed to participate in Communion on the grounds they don't understand what it's all about. Well, if understanding is a condition set by Jesus then none of his disciples could have taken part!

Spiritual Cleanliness

Another condition cited for inclusion at Communion is that of Spiritual Cleanliness. 1 Corinthians 11:27 is quoted to back this idea, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord." The "unworthy manner" is interpreted to mean "sinful" or "spiritually unclean." However, Paul is talking about some having food while other fellow believers are left without. Those who are not willing to share are those considered "unworthy" by Paul. That means that if we desire to exclude or not share the Communion Service with anyone - male, female, old, young, black or white, slave or free - we too are unworthy!

Back in John's gospel we find Jesus including the spiritually unclean. In his discussion with Peter about foot washing we find this verse, "For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'" (verse 11) Judas was not clean but he was allowed to participate!

At that time the other disciples didn't know about Judas' designs of betrayal but Jesus did. In his welcoming inclusiveness Jesus would not exclude Judas, a sinner, and neither should we.

Passover a Festival for All

While realising that Jesus is teaching us to be inclusive rather than exclusive toward those wanting to join in at Communion I remembered a couple of things from the OT. In Exodus 12:47 we are told, "The whole congregation of Israel shall celebrate it." No exclusion there - male, female, old or young! We also read in Numbers 9:14, "Any alien residing among you who wishes to keep the passover to the LORD shall do so..." Again, all inclusive! The unclean are included too! See Numbers 9:7-10.

All the other major festivals held by Israel were very exclusive. They were celebrated by men - no women or children, and certainly no unclean. Passover is very, very different and this is why Jesus chose it as the basis for this fundamental Christian Celebration.

Children?

It's amazing how we can read a passage dozens of times thinking we know what's being said and then one day a word seems to be there that wasn't before. That's how it was when I read John 13:33 a couple of weeks ago. Jesus is telling his disciples about his soon departure. With hindsight we know he's telling them about his death, resurrection and ascension. That's the basis of the faith and so we gloss over the verse. But the opening words of the verse hit me, "bang." Jesus addresses his disciples as, "little children." What a strange thing - they're all grown men according to Jewish law. So why does Jesus speak to his disciples as such?

Let's note where Jesus is in the Passover Seder. In verses 26 and 27 we read of Jesus breaking off a piece of bread, dipping it in something and giving it to Judas. We normally look at the persons involved in these verses rather than on what's happening in the meal. To a practicing Jew it would be obvious where they are in the Seder. Jesus hands Judas the "affikomen" or dessert bread.

At a Passover Seder three pieces of unleavened bread (matzah) are placed before each person. After the second cup of wine, the Cup of Salvation - to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt, the middle piece of bread is broken in half and hidden somewhere. The other two pieces are eaten with bitter herbs (raw horse radish) to bring tears to your eyes - a memory of slavery. Apple sauce (charoset) made with crushed almonds and wine is also put on the bread to remind them of the mud used to make bricks in Egypt and also of the sweetness of salvation. Some Jews would make a sandwich placing both the horse radish and apple sauce between the two pieces of bread.

At this point little children are encouraged to ask why they do this only on this occasion. The story of salvation is then told to the children in response to their questions. The Passover Seder answers to four different types of child, based on questions found in the Exodus story in the Bible: wise, wicked, simple and one who doesn't know he should ask.

4 Types?

A Wise child may ask, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" (Deuteronomy 6:20) - a complex question shows wisdom and a desire for deep understanding.

A Wicked child - one who sees himself outside the community - may ask, "What do you mean by this rite?" (Exodus 12:26). The wording of the question shows he views himself outside the people of God. By inclusion in the meal this should lead to a natural change of heart.

A Simple child may ask, "What does this mean?" (Exodus 13:14) - a simple question only requires a simple answer - don't confuse children by being too deep.

A child who doesn't know to ask will need to be shown: "It is because of what the Lord did for me." (Exodus 13:8) demonstration through my life...

After Salvation History is recounted all tuck in to the most delicious meal of the year. Following the entrée comes the dessert - with the third piece of bread that was hidden. The little children seek and find and are then rewarded.

Back in John

Is Jesus telling his disciples about their salvation in this passage? Does Jesus talk about looking and finding? Do the disciples ask where he is going? Are "children" having their questions answered by Jesus?

Looking in John's account of the Last Supper I find that the answers to the above questions is Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes! Jesus is obviously following the traditional Passover Seder but explaining it in context of His Sacrifice and the resulting Salvation.

Salvation is for ALL! - young and old alike, male and female, black and white, Jew and Gentile, bond and free. The challenge of Communion is to get this message across to those participating while crossing the boundaries of tradition. Looking in John's gospel I find Jesus presented His new message by shocking His congregation with some novel ideas. Maybe that's the way we should do it too?