

Session 1 Encountering Jesus in John

The living water

Let's begin at the end. The last verse of the gospel is a colophon, an author's signature, 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things, and has written them. We know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if everyone of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.' (John 21:25). Note the beguiling mix of tenses and pronouns. The beloved disciple '... is testifying.' Is the Beloved Disciple still alive? He '...has written them' - aorist, past, complete. Is this work the text of the gospel or a written source from which the gospel has been compiled, or something else? 'We know that his testimony is true' - who are 'we', the followers of the Beloved Disciple, some 'elders' of his community, or a group compiling the gospel? And are women amongst their number? 'I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written'. Who is 'I'? Is this slip from 'we' to 'I', a lifting of the veil, an authorial signature as tantalising in its own way as that of the young man in Mark who slips away naked when Jesus is arrested who may or may not be Mark the evangelist.¹ And is the reference to 'the books that would be written' a hint that there are other works circulating about Jesus, and if so, what – the synoptic gospels, a collection of Paul's letters, or material now lost? How dearly we would love those questions to be answered! But that little colophon is deeply moving, because just for a moment we can almost reach our hand out and touch the life of a Christian community at the end of the first century whose life was formed by the testimony of the Beloved Disciple, even, perhaps, to touch the hand of the Beloved Disciple himself and draw close to the intimacy he shared with Jesus.²

This colophon is of course the second in John which occurs at the end of the appendix which is ch 21. The first is what appears to have been the original end of the gospel at ch 20 – 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' (20:31)

So, this book is a selective, carefully constructed story, cherry-picking choice nuggets of tradition, written with the deliberate evangelical theological purpose – '...that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name.' (Jn 20:31). In other words, it is designed deliberately to enable encounters with Jesus.

If we put the two colophons together, we can begin to see the context which shapes the gospel. Like all the gospels, but to a heightened degree, this is a post-Easter gospel. Jesus had promised the Spirit, 'another Advocate' (14:16) who will '...teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.' (14:26). It is the Spirit who has guided the creation of this gospel, hewn from the testimony of the 'Beloved disciple'. The Spirit has been in their midst, and the result is this exquisitely crafted piece of literature. I say that deliberately, because John's gospel deserves a place amongst the world's finest literature.

¹ Frank Kermode *The genesis of secrecy: on the interpretation of narrative* (Harvard, Harvard UP 1979) pp 55f

² Tom Thatcher 'The Beloved Disciple, the Fourth Evangelist and the authorship of the Fourth Gospel' in Judith Lieu and Martinus C.de Boer *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Oxford, OUP 2018) pp. 83-100 gives a convenient overview of the present state of scholarship about authorship.

Behind the confusing pronouns of the appendix colophon, we can glimpse the life of a Christian community towards the end of the first century, in the throes of a painful, tender parting of the ways between synagogue and church as both communities responded to the destruction of the Jerusalem and the razing of the Temple in 70 AD.³ In those circumstances, coming to believe that Jesus was ‘...the Messiah, the Son of God’ (20:31) was all the more important. John’s Jesus, unlike the Jesus of the synoptists, takes every opportunity to explore who he is and his relationship to the Father. John’s gospel is an extended Christological poem, from Cana to the cross. It is held together by a series of elemental images – light, life, water, bread, vine, way, truth – the coloured threads that make up the narrative stitchery. What I want to do in these sessions is catch hold of a few of these and see where they take us.

First then, living water.

Nothing is more elemental than water. Without it there would be no life. Life on earth began in the waters of the oceans. All plants and animals, ourselves included, depend on water. We could (heaven forbid!) live without food for weeks, but for less than a day or so without water. Our bodies are 60% water. Waters breaking is a necessary prelude to birth and new life. 71% of the globe is covered by oceans. 99% of the living space on earth is oceanic.

Scripture takes us on a journey from creation emerging from the chaos waters to the river of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb which irrigates the Tree of Life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. It passes by floods and rainbow covenants, the still waters by which the shepherd God restores the soul and Ezekiel’s imperious vision of the rivers flowing to the sea from the bejewelled restored Temple creating an ecology teeming with life. When Jesus claimed to be ‘living water’ then, he was telling us that he is elemental, unignorable, essential, and he would have expected to set off a whole kaleidoscope of images and connections.

That is in the theological abstract as it were, but the encounter with the woman of Samaria is no abstraction. The gospel writers are not good at women. Sometimes they are completely invisible like the bride at the wedding at Cana. Sometimes they are just names like Joanna the wife of Chuza and Susannah who cash-rolled part of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Rarely are they more than two dimensional. John’s women are exceptions, and the Samaritan woman is complex, rounded, completely real.

Samaria was sandwiched between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north. All were under Roman rule, and the quickest route from Galilee to Jerusalem was through Samaria, but such was the enmity between Jews and Samaritans that Jewish travellers generally tried to avoid Samaria. Relations were, to put it mildly, strained. The problem, as with Catholics and Protestants in seventeenth century Europe, was divergent readings of history.

They shared a common heritage in the first century – monotheism, attachment to the land of Israel, Hebrew, descent from Adam, the same cluster of ancestors – Abraham and Sarai, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, the same priestly tribe of Levi, similar feasts, festivals and rituals, the Pentateuch, synagogues and symbols like the menorah. Both agreed that God should be worshipped in one place (Dt 12), it was simply that they disagreed on which place.

³ See (eg) Thatcher *op cit*; Sandra Schneiders *Written that you may believe: encountering Jesus in the fourth gospel* (New York, Crossroad 1999) pp 41-46; Martinus C. De Boer ‘The story of the Johannine community and its literature’ in Lieu and Martinus *op cit* pp 64-80.

The Samaritans believed they were the descendants of the remnant of the ten tribes left in the northern kingdom of Israel after its sacking by the Assyrians in the 720s, the true guardians of the original revelation of God, and of the Temple on Mount Gerazim. Indeed, the Samaritan ten commandments specify that Mount Gerazim should be honoured.

The Jews thought that was nonsense. There were no survivors of the ten tribes. Samaria had been settled by a motley multi-cultural group of incomers from across the Assyrian empire who eventually persuaded a renegade priest from Jerusalem to set up a Temple for them on Mount Gerazim (2 Ki 18). Mount Zion was the true home of Yahweh and the Jews were his faithful servants. There was therefore no love lost. For hundreds of years Samaritans and Jews had deliberately backed opposite forces in the frequent regional power struggles. The Jewish book of Ecclesiasticus, which dates about 130 BC, called the Samaritans ‘the foolish people that live in Shechem’, describing them as ‘not even a people’.⁴

It is noteworthy then that John, unlike the synoptists, records Jesus’ ministry moving between Judea, Samaria and Galilee rather than simply being within Galilee. And all the more noteworthy, indeed remarkable that Jesus chooses to reveal who he is not in Galilee or Judea, but in Samaria.

And the person to whom he makes that revelation is not just a heretic, but a woman, and not just a woman, but a woman with a history of brokenness and we may infer trauma which places her well beyond the pale of normal community relations, which is why she is at the well by herself in the heat of the midday sun. The other women would have come in the cool of the early morning.

‘Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink”.’ The sheer chutzpah of it! Four words in English, three in Greek. Axes to the barriers of gender, ethnicity, religion and culture. Spirit filled words.

And from that moment of dissonance, John weaves a conversation which, as so often in his gospel that takes the warp of the ordinary and unites it with the weft of eternal things. The water in the well and the ever-quickening water of life; the rivalry between Mt Gerazim and Mt Zion and the nature of true worship; the wreckage of human relationships and the possibility of new life; the transformation of a broken, trashed up piece of human history into the very fabric of God’s kingdom of reconciliation and hope.

John’s narrative foregrounds vulnerability. First there is the vulnerability of the woman. She has had five husbands and is now in a new relationship. Had she been widowed, we would surely have been told. We are not told why she had five husbands, nor why she is now living with a man to whom she is not married, but that is scarcely an untroubled emotional history. In his beautiful commentary on John, Jean Vanier the founder of the L’Arche communities, surmises that she is dealing with rejection, deep guilt, lack of love, and a shattered self-image.⁵ Jesus understands. He neither judges, nor condemns, nor condescends. He doesn’t lecture her on morality or sexuality (church of Jesus Christ, take note). He accepts her as she is, and asks for a drink.

4 These paragraphs rely on Gary Knoppers *Jews and Samaritans: the origin and history of their early relations* (Oxford, OUP 2017) pp. 1-14. For a broader account of the Samaritans, see Richard Russell *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: journeys into the disappearing religions of the Middle East* (London, Simon and Schuster 2014) ch 5 (pp?);

5 Jean Vanier *Drawn into the mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (New York, Paulist Press 2004) p 91

It's hot. He's tired out. In a sense he's a missionary in a foreign culture, dependent on the kindness of others, and he presents her with his vulnerability. That is the trigger for the conversation, and leads them to the contemplation of the 'living water' which will cleanse, refresh and nourish a life that will never end. He sees to the heart of her need, and her sorrow. She diverts him onto theology, which is always a good diversion, and Jesus responds with pastoral tact and theological precision. The dispute about the sanctuaries is a secondary matter, for the time is coming when places will be irrelevant, for the Father will be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Yet particularity is important for salvation is rooted not in the mish-mash of Samaritan religious history, but is 'of the Jews', an outworking of that long conversation which began with Abraham, wound its way through kings and prophets, law givers and poets and ends – at a wellside in a foreign land – 'I am he'. Jesus chooses to reveal who he really is not to Pharisees and religious academics, not to his closest followers, but to a triply marginalised woman in a country which, if it had had them, would have had its guns trained on Jerusalem.

There is a symmetry of revelation and insight about this conversation which is beautifully captured in a sculpture by Stephen Broadbent in the cloister at Chester Cathedral. It was commissioned by the Cathedral in 1994 to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Benedictine Abbey of St Werburgh. It was a happy union of artist and Johannine scholar, for the Dean at the time was Stephen Smalley. The woman and Jesus form a perfect circle. The ambiguity of the conversation is gently caught for the bowl of water is at the centre and they both hold it – is she giving him the drink he asked for, or is he offering her the living water? Their gazes are caught in rapt communion, and the graceful arc of her body shows her restored to the fullness of life, truly a sister of the one who came that we might all have life.

The deeper we allow ourselves to be absorbed in this moment, the more we understand of God and God's way with us. On the borders of one of the ancient world's most sensitive areas of conflict, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink, and as they talk barriers crumble – ethnicity, religious difference, gender. Jesus the subversive is holding up myths of religious history to the light and asking questions about identity. The problems they manifest – her preference for drawing water in the heat of the day when she could be alone, her scarred and battered emotional history with all that embodies about the relationship between men and women, her initial inability to see beyond the physical and immediate – are placed in a new context which opens up new possibilities. And all because Jesus asked her for a drink. Jesus has that effect. And the closer we draw to Jesus, the more that becomes our experience too. The sculptor, Stephen Broadbent, said that he wanted '...to show the intensity of the relationship, in such, and at the very moment, there was no one else existing in the world...It was the tenderness of Christ that touched me personally, her shame was to be taken away and not paraded across her community, with whom she was wonderfully reconciled.'⁶

The living water cleanses, refreshes, gives life. In the minds of John's readers or listeners it echoed the waters that flowed in baptism. No one can enter the kingdom of God, Jesus told Nicodemus without being born of water and the Spirit (3:5) The link between the flowing waters of baptism and the giving of the Spirit lie deep in Israel's prophetic tradition. Ezekiel's account of the New Covenant makes clear that the coming of the new age will be ushered in by the washing of people and the gift of the Spirit (Ez 36:22-32). In this gospel John the

⁶ <https://broadbent.studio/water-of-life-casestudy>; accessed 05.03.19

Baptist baptises with water and sees the Spirit poured out on Jesus, and a dove hovering. Water then becomes the source of laughable abundance at Cana – it would be some wedding reception that disposed of the equivalent of 800 bottles of the best burgundy. But it is that divine grace in all its reckless generosity which causes Jesus to cleanse the Temple – a new age confronting the old, the established, the powerful. That works its way out dramatically in John – Nicodemus juxtaposed by the Samaritan woman; the virulent opposition from the Pharisees countered by the faith of the royal official whose son is healed and the man born blind; the attempt to make him king after the feeding of the 5,000 by the Christological discourses – I am, the light of world, the good shepherd, before Abraham was I am.

In the middle of that developing controversy, Jesus was at the Festival of the Booths, teaching in the Temple. Each day during the week long festival a golden flagon was filled with water from the pool of Siloam and poured out in libation in the Temple.⁷ As he watches the rite, Jesus cries out ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ (7:37) It is, John tells us in an editorial aside, a reference to the Spirit which was not yet given because Jesus had not been glorified. And, inevitably, they sought to arrest him. Jesus’ public ministry is the experience of light in the darkness, of the rule of God encountering the cultures and kingdoms of the ‘world’.

And nowhere is that starker than when Jesus takes a towel and a bowl of water and washes his disciples’ feet (13:1-20). It is, so far as scholars can discern, unique in ancient literature because the footwashing happens in the middle of the meal. Footwashing was, of course, a commonplace act of courtesy and act of welcome in the Graeco-Roman world where roads were dusty and the weather hot. Jesus gently upbraids Simon the Pharisee for not providing this service when he dined with him (Luke 7:44). It was normally undertaken by servants, but it was not unknown for a host to do this himself to show deep devotion.

John records the footwashing as a pivotal point, the switch from Jesus’ public ministry to the private, intimate instruction of the twelve. Bultmann said of this moment ‘The noise of the cosmos has died away: the stillness of night prevails.’⁸ It is the moment which heralds the unfolding of the farewell discourse which is itself the theological explanation of the passion, which in John is also Christ’s glorification. Some commentators describe chapters 13 onwards as ‘The book of glory’ (eg. Sloyan). And it opens with the footwashing

As always in John, Jesus is in control. He knows that his ‘hour’ (another immensely significant Johannine word) has come. He knows that the Father had placed all things into his hands, and knowing all that, he takes his outer robe off, takes a towel and a bowl of water, and prepares to wash their feet. The Word, the Logos, kneels. Tom Wright is surely correct to suggest that this is John’s equivalent of Phil 2:51-11⁹, a moment of kenosis, of self-emptying, the ultimate symbolic outworking of incarnation, and as such a pre-figuring of the cross.

We humans organise our world through social systems and hierarchies. However we try and avoid it, we seem condemned to pyramids of power with the rich, powerful, beautiful and

7 C.K. Barrett *The gospel according to John: an introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text* (London, SPCK 1955) pp 270-1

8 Quoted in Lesslie Newbigin *The light has come: an exposition of the fourth gospel* (Edinburgh, Handsel Press 1982) p 167

9 Tom Wright *John for everyone: part 2 chapters 11-21* (London, SPCK 2002) p 45

intelligent at the top, and the poor, weak and disadvantaged at the bottom. There are those who govern and those who are governed. Hierarchies are all around us – management structures at work, league tables, examination results and so on.

Jesus subverts this with simple profundity – water and a towel. And Peter reacts as we would all react. It's wrong, its subversion, it shouldn't be like this. Teachers don't wash the feet of their disciples any more than managing directors wait at canteen tables or Old Etonians end up working on production lines. Jesus is challenging Peter's most basic assumptions about the way the world is. He is turning pyramids upside down. He even washes Judas' feet with the same tenderness and care that he does the other eleven despite the fact that he had long known who was to betray him (6:64, 71)

It's always stimulating to consider how artists respond, and I want to consider two responses from very different periods. The first comes from around 1547. It's by one of the great Venetian artists Jacopo Tintoretto, 'Christ washing his disciples' feet'. It was painted for St Marcuola Venice and it's full of vivid life.¹⁰ The background is a bit like a theatre set divided by vertical lines – and some have suggested that it is indeed the adaptation of a set used as a backdrop for tragedies. But Tintoretto juxtaposes that tragic framework with low comedy – one disciple is frantically tugged to release another from his leggings so that he can have his feet washed. That is balanced pictorially by the disciple on the other side of the table with its splendid tablecloth struggling back into his. To their stage right is an isolated figure, taken to be Judas, drying his feet and contemplating what he has to do next. In the centre, hogging the stage as they always do is a dog! More seriously, like all dogs he is faithful and loyal and his nose points in the direction of a battle for fidelity – Jesus persuading Peter that he too must have his feet washed. We can sense both Peter's reluctance and Christ's insistence. Tintoretto explicitly coupled the footwashing to the eucharist because immediately above Jesus' head is a painting of the Lord's Supper.

Ford Madox Brown is now appreciated as one of the finest of British nineteenth century artists.¹¹ Although he never joined the pre-Raphaelites, his influence on them, and they on him, was profound. I've juxtaposed one of his best-known paintings, *Work*, with *Christ washing Peter's feet*. Both were painted in the 1850s and bought by Thomas Plint, a Leeds industrialist with Evangelical sympathies.

I've juxtaposed them so that you can see the ways in which he reveals the strength in Jesus' arms – this footwashing is *work*. Christ is a young, virile worker and concentration is intense. To make the connection between Christ and the dignity of manual labour was a radical statement in the mid 1850s.

Brown also modelled Peter – massive, rock-like – on his fellow artist, Holman Hunt. This Peter is much older than Jesus, lost in profound if uncomfortable contemplation. What we are expected to know is that shortly after the rock will crumble as a servant girl says, 'You're one of his aren't you?' But still Christ washes his feet. Behind them the disciples are a motley crew. Judas, stage right, tightens his sandal lace, the bag of silver on the table before

¹⁰ Jane Martineau and Thomas Hope *The genius of Venice 1500-1600* (London, Royal Academy of Arts 1983) p. 213

¹¹ ODNB, Tim Barringer

him. Another disciple has his head in his hands, another whispers in his companion's ear and far stage left what might be the beloved disciple has his arm around Peter's shoulder.¹²

The meaning of the footwashing is endless, like all great narrative and poetry. But as John makes clear it is also a lesson about the nature of the post-Easter community, for they are to wash one another's feet – '...servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who set them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.' (13:16-17)

The footwashing occupied a singularly important narrative space in John. He makes it the turning point of his gospel, the moment public turned to private, and Johannine divergence begins to return into some kind of loose parallel with the synoptics. Although far from identical there are more similarities in the passion narratives than in the preceding accounts of the public ministry which are almost incompatible. At this point the synoptics all have an account of the Last Supper, which is a Passover meal. John's theological design prohibits this because Jesus is the Lamb of God who is to be the Passover sacrifice, so his supper happens the evening before. But, and this is a measure of how important the footwashing is to him, where the other gospels have the institution of the Lord's Supper, John has the footwashing.

That is worth a little exploration. There's always a danger that when we look into things like this we see our own faces staring back. Gerard Sloyan correctly points out that the conclusions scholars have reached have a strange symmetry with what they believe about the sacraments and that '[n]either the pro- nor anti-sacrament people can produce enough positive data from this Gospel to support their contention fully'¹³ It would be an eccentric historian indeed who tried to argue that the eucharist was not the central act of Christian worship by the end of the first century, and the language of John 6 and the discourse about the bread of life seems to me so eucharistically literate that it would be an uphill struggle to argue that the Johannine church was non-eucharistic. That isn't the point. The question which John lays before us is what would it be like if the main public ritual of the church wasn't the eucharist, but foot-washing?

Jean Vanier, a Catholic, and a one time a professor of philosophy and founder of L'Arche, took this question with complete seriousness. L'Arche communities are ecumenical, some are interfaith, and so the eucharist cannot play a unifying role in their communal life. But footwashing can and does. Vanier explains the way it works in his commentary on John by introducing us to Eric, a severely disabled young man of sixteen who was welcomed in to one of the L'Arche communities:

'We had met him at the local psychiatric hospital...
When he arrived...
He was blind and deaf and could not walk or speak.
He was not toilet trained.
I have never seen so much anguish in a young person as I saw in Eric.
There was a desire in him to die;

12 The analyses of Tintoretto and Brown rely on Brian Bishop *The continuing dialogue: an investigation into the artistic afterlife of the five narratives peculiar to the Fourth Gospel and an assessment of their contribution to the hermeneutic of that Gospel* (Resource, Eugene, Oregon 2017) pp. 150-175; for a further comparison of the paintings see Tim Berringer - <https://mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/ford-madox-brown-work>, accessed 05.03.19

13 Gerard Sloyan *John* (Atlanta, John Knox Press 1988) p 166/7

He just would not keep down food in his stomach.’¹⁴

Vanier continues by explaining that the only way the community could communicate to Eric that he was precious and loved was through touch, and particularly through holding and washing his body – ‘...with respect and love.’ The paraliturgy of footwashing, which is practised on important occasions, achieves what Vanier calls ‘a communion of hearts’. Luke, one of the assistants in an Australian L’Arche recounts his experience:

‘There was a pilgrim walk of 280 people...It had been a long, hot and emotional day... We went into sharing groups. There was a basin, jug and towel. Without saying anything we entered into the ritual of washing each other’s feet. In the silence we washed each other’s feet and there was a beautiful moment when a group somewhere started singing *Ubi caritas*... That was a spontaneous moment. We didn’t need to hear the story so much...we knew that in our heart, we’d been pondering it that day and knew that at the end of the day we would have the cool water on our feet, yeah, we’d be fed in that way, body and spirit.’¹⁵

This is a rather different experience to the formalised rituals of Maundy Thursday, and perhaps it takes us closer to what Jesus was trying to express. The footwashing was individual and personal, not corporate. Jesus was paying attention to each of the disciples as individuals, treating them with the same tenderness and courtesy that the L’Arche community showed to Eric. Vanier again

The love of Jesus reveals that we are important,
That we are a presence of God
And are called to stand up and do the work of God;
To love others as God loves them,
To serve others and to wash their feet.¹⁶

I suspect those of us in ministry strive to do that in all the varied encounters that come our way pastorally, but I wonder how often we allow Jesus to wash our feet, to express his love for us. I suspect there is an innate, instinctive Peter in most of us. Its part of our make up that we like being at the centre, animating the activity of the church, enabling its liturgy. We are called to be leaders, and its because the church has recognised those skills in us that we do what we do. Being passive, being on the receiving end is not what we are used to. But that is what the footwashing Jesus wants us to be – those who receive from him, receive his tenderness, his attention, his love.

And unless we do that, we’ll be unable to minister properly because, as he explains afterwards, ‘...I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.’ (13:14).

Trying to discover how the earliest Christian communities organised their lives is a task that is fraught with methodological difficulties. At best its like holding a text up to the mirror and then reading between the lines – and that’s before analysing what influence the reader has on

14 Vanier *op cit* p 231

15 Catherine Anderson and Sandra Carroll ‘The footwashing in John 13:1-20 in the context of L’Arche’ *Australian ejournal of theology* 20.3 (December 2013) pp 185-196, at pp 192-3. Accessed 06.02.19

16 Vanier p 232

what he or she then reads. Just for a moment though, let's consider some of the evidence John gives us. First of all there are no institutional commands about baptism and the eucharist (cf Mt 28:19; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:25). Second, and we'll re-visit this when we come to the image of the vine tomorrow, John's focus is on the relationship between the believer and Christ. It's often said that John's vine image is the equivalent of Paul's 'body' – but John knows nothing of Paul's concerns that all the different charisms of the church should be reconciled within one body. It's also notable that the word 'apostle' is completely missing from John's gospel – all the more notable if you consider its significance for Paul who was writing between the 30s and the 60s, and in the ways in which they are revered in writings which can be tentatively dated in the later decades of the first century like the synoptics. It's not that he doesn't understand the concept – the Twelve have a place in his narrative, and Jesus sends his followers into the world just as the Father sent him (17:18) – but John's focus is on discipleship, which all Christians share as they accept the love of Christ. Then there is the question of Peter. Peter is the most prominent apostle for the majority of New Testament writers, but not in John where that role is taken by the Beloved Disciple – and that, as Raymond Brown points out is determined by love, not office.

Indeed, the nearest we get to what we would recognise as 'office' in John is the re-commissioning or rehabilitation of Peter in the appendix (ch 21), but the injunctions he receives are deeply Johannine – Feed my lambs, Tend my sheep, Feed my sheep. Think too of the role of women in John – the Samaritan woman the first missionary, Martha the one who confesses that Jesus is the Christ (12:27) – a role given to Peter in Matthew (Mt 16:16), Mary of Magdala the apostle to the apostles – the first witness to the resurrection, and Mary the mother of the Lord – to whom we will return in our final session.¹⁷ Without drawing any definite conclusions about how the Johannine communion was organised, this is a very different world to that of Paul and his disciples.

The church evolved as it evolved, and ministry became what it became – apostolic, Pauline, with distinct charisms and offices, hierarchical. But it is worth looking in the Johannine mirror to ask what we might receive from John.

Discussion groups

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of John's understanding of church and ministry?
- Can we learn anything from the Johannine witness for the better equipping of the church of to-day?

In a nice, subtle piece of narrative art John as it were, gave a trailer for the footwashing at the end of the bread of life discourse in chapter 6. A falling away is beginning – many of his disciples, we read, '...turned back and no longer went with him' (6:67), Peter confesses, Jesus prophesies that one of the twelve is a devil and we, the readers, are let into a secret which is hidden from the disciples, 'He was speaking of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.' (6:71) The falling away continues as the story advances – his family, the crowd, those in authority, and is quietly concluded in chapter

¹⁷ These paragraphs rely on Raymond Brown *The churches the apostles left behind* (London, Geoffrey Chapman 1984) pp 88-95

13 when Judas takes his morsel of bread and goes out into the night. That's also John's way of linking the supper, into the middle of which he places the footwashing, and the bread of life discourse. Its interesting that betrayal is linked to meals – the only other mention of Judas is at the supper in Bethany where he takes exception to the anointing (Jn 12:4).¹⁸

There is another link. The footwashing is about purity and cleansing. Once Judas has gone only the clean are left, and it is also about the Christian community. Unless I wash you, Jesus says to Peter 'you have no share in me.' (13:7) – literally '...you have no share (meros) with me'. 'Meros' is an odd little word with a range of meanings from a portion to a district or a region, heritage or inheritance, and in the New Testament it is variously deployed – parts of a body, a bit of an argument, part of a garment or of a group of people, even in Luke 24:42 a piece of fish.¹⁹

Words carry allusions with them, and no translation can ever do justice to the multiple meanings of an untranslated word. Having a 'part' or 'share' in Jesus had some or all of those meanings and resonances for the original reader / hearer of the gospel. Sharing in Jesus may have had spatial, organic, intellectual overtones, perhaps even of ingesting, and eating, as in the bread of life discourse. Maybe even a part of the Paschal Lamb.

The one who is living water is also the bread of life – '...whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' (6:35). The language and imagery of ch 6 has strong eucharistic echoes. As Jesus feeds the five thousand (Jn 6:11), Jesus takes (elaben), blesses (eucharistestas) and gives (dedoken) – and all three words are found in the synoptic and Pauline accounts of the Last Supper. A further linguistic echo might be faintly heard in the words for the basket of leftovers (klasmata) which is related to the verb (eklasen) 'to break' which is also found in Paul and the synoptics.

However, the clearest signals come in vv. 52-58 – '...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.' The Greek is striking. First the word for eat (trogen) is not the usual word for eat in John (which is esthein). It is a very unusual word. Apart from these few verses it appears only once more in John (interestingly referring to Judas in 13:18)²⁰, and once in Matthew (24:38). It is not found in LXX, Philo or Josephus. Its meaning is to munch or crunch or chew, and when used of animals to nibble or gnaw.²¹ Second, the word for flesh is 'sarx' whereas in a normal Eucharistic context 'soma' (body) would be the norm. Whilst there is an obvious narrational reason for this – this is the gospel which tells the story of the Word become 'sarx' – its use in this context is notable. This is 'in your face' language – chewing flesh, drinking blood. Drinking blood was, of course, strictly forbidden in the Law (Lev 17:10-14). Small wonder then that this was the watershed moment for 'the Jews' (6:52 and 7:1). It is too much even for some of the disciples (6:66)

Ecumenically this, of course, difficult territory. Nothing has produced such intense and long-lasting division in the church as eucharistic language. Whatever Jesus originally said would have been in Aramaic, so the question becomes, why does John produce this singular

18 Esther Kobel *Dining with John: communal meals and identity formation in the fourth gospel and its historical and cultural context* (Brill, Leiden 2011) p. 271

19 Jane Webster *Ingesting Jesus: eating and drinking in the gospel of John* (Brill, Leiden 2003) p 110

20 Interestingly, John provides his own translation of Ps 40:10 here, eschewing the 'esthion' of the LXX for his own 'trogen' – C.K. Barrett *op cit* p 370.

21 Kobel *op cit* p.225-6; Webster *op cit* p 83. Note Webster suggests that it is used twice in the LXX Prov 24:22; Micah 7:4

translation? One study suggests that John had caught the cultural echoes of the Graeco-Roman world in which he lived. We know from a number of classical sources that there were groups in society that bonded over human sacrifice, and we know too that in the first three centuries Christians were frequently accused of cannibalism and infanticide – the fantasies are extreme and bizarre – but the evidence of accusation and prosecution is recorded by Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch, Origen, Tertullian and Minucius Felix.²² Do we catch in John's language an almost evangelistic point – just as you bond over flesh and blood, so do we, but there is all the difference between your grotesque rituals of sacrifice and the offering up of the Lamb of God.

Be that as it may, what is clear is the importance of 'ingesting' Jesus – 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.' (Jn 6:56) It is as if, in the act of consumption, Jesus becomes part of the consumer, and the consumer part of Jesus. Jesus is both the provider of food and the food itself. It is perhaps worth pausing here to note the tensions within the text itself. The sheer physicality of eating and drinking which is underlined in verses 51-58 is suddenly and unexpectedly balanced a few verses later in the discourse when John records Jesus saying, 'It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.' (Jn 6:63)

We are handling the most intimate and difficult of things here, how we abide in Christ, and we will return to that tomorrow when we think about the vine. For the moment though, Jesus describes himself as the living water, and if we drink of it we shall thirst no more, and as the bread of life. Just as bread and water are basic essentials for life, so too is Jesus. Nothing is more natural than drinking water, eating bread – the way Jesus comes to us, encounters us, is as natural and simple as that. Encountering Jesus isn't an exercise in spiritual athletics. He comes to us as we are, not as we are not. He meets us in bread and wine and words, and in the hands and faces and voices of those he loves – and that a pretty long list because God so loved *the world*.

And the cost of that brings us to the final image of water in the gospel – '...one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth). (19:34-35)

John wasn't writing a medical textbook, so we can leave those speculations to one side. He was writing a gospel, threaded through with imagery. We've been tracing water – it cleanses, purifies, turns into wine, slakes thirst, flows in baptism, heals divisions between Samaritans and Jews, soothes tired and dusty feet and creates ministry and community, its enables life. We could trace a similar history for blood, and as the soldier thrusts his spear in just to ensure that Jesus really is dead, blood and water flow. As they looked back, patristic writers inevitably saw the sacramental gifts of baptism and the eucharist, and in a sense they were right because that was their way of saying that this is the world's redemption, its cleansing, its new creation – '...this affirmation of death (wrote Raymond Brown) is paradoxically the beginning of life.'²³ The thirsty can come and drink, for now he has been lifted up, glorified, and as blood and water flow from his side the Spirit is liberated, the Spirit that

22 These paragraphs rely on Kobel *op cit* pp. 252-61

23 Quoted in Newbigin p 258

would inspire the reflections over a lifetime of the beloved disciple who stood there, saw those things, whose testimony is true.

Prayer

Loving God, you are the spring of water
That wells up to eternal life.
Your Spirit moved over the waters
And brought creation to birth.
In the water and blood of your Son you give us new life.
Creator God we praise you.
Redeeming God we worship you
Sustaining God we adore you.

Lord Jesus Christ
We praise you for the miracle of your life
Flowing into ours, a life-giving stream.
Poured out in good measure
Pressed down, shaken and overflowing
Your life in us witnesses to love poured out for the world,
Praise be to you, lover, redeemer and friend.²⁴

24 St Cuthbert's Centre Worship Book p.37