

Mission Council Bible Study – Monday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2019

## Communion Service Sermon

## Listening to God speaking to us – through the Church (Mk. 14:17-28)

In this sermon and the following Bible studies, I want to explore with you the themes chosen for Mission Council: **listening to God speaking to us through the Church, through each other, and through the world**. Since we're gathering for the first time around the Communion table, it seems appropriate to begin with listening to God speaking to us through the Church.

For here, supremely, is one of the treasures that have been handed on to us across the generations. Here is one of those trysting places where lovers meet so beloved of our traditions. If we are to listen to God speaking to us through the Church, then we surely do well to pause as song and silence, prayer and preaching, bread and wine gather us in. Here mystery and wonder embrace us. Here, as so often, we hear those words that draw us in to the depths of the revelation of the love of God: "This is my body, broken for you... this is my blood, shed for you."

Listening to God speaking through the Church surely invites us, amidst all of theology's billions of words, all of scripture's timeless truths, to hear the starkness of our salvation on the lips of the one who will embrace creation's fall and failure on the cross and redeem it.

Mark tells a breathless gospel story. One of the great themes is of discipleship; of what it means to follow Jesus and thus to dare to become what will be the Church. We join Mark in chapter 14, where the narrative becomes more continuous and organised; events unfolding to take us through the Passion.

We are given the context; it is the Festival of Unleavened Bread, combined, by the time of Jesus, with Passover. We are amidst one of the three great annual pilgrim festivals bringing the faithful into Jerusalem to celebrate and honour God's covenant. It is, already, a season for remembering, and setting memory free from any prison of the past to become the lifeblood of now. The disciples know this. Passover matters to them. But, as Mark 14 unfolds, new notes of longing, loss and love join ancient faithfulness and worship.

Before Jesus and the disciples assemble in an upper room, a woman, nameless in Mark, finds them in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. She breaks open an alabaster jar and pours ointment of nard worth a year's wages over the head of Jesus. When she's condemned for wastefulness, Jesus says she'll be forever part of his story because she, alone, has prepared his body for burial. Passover already pitches Jesus and the disciples into remembering salvation and its costs. Jesus is now writing redemption into the very being of God.

Just before our passage, Mark tells us that Judas Iscariot promises to betray Jesus for a price. We read of Jesus predicting his betrayal and, drawing upon Zechariah's prophecy, warning that he will be struck down and they, like frightened sheep, will be scattered.

At Passover, the table and the meal tell Jews their story of salvation; each item the catalyst to move the storytelling on, every element echoing to the salvation song of centuries. Jesus now takes bread and wine from that same Passover table and speaks a new meaning into them. God's embrace is now as close as our own flesh and blood, as close as our own breathing. The Aramaic Jesus spoke over bread and wine that we take into English would be: "This is my self."

God becomes salvation; beckoning the disciples into a new realm, a new world. Through the sacrifice and loss of God's own self in Christ all that captures and contorts their lives is to be swept away as they hear a strange new chapter begin:

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

What might it mean for us to listen to God speaking through the Church?

Surely, one of the most fundamental aspects of such listening is offering ourselves continuously, deliberately, openly, expectantly and corporately into the theatre of worship? John Calvin, amidst the turmoil of 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, explored in his *Institutes* a question we might still need to ask of our churches and ourselves: What are the essential marks of the Church? His conclusion remains alluringly simple: "Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." (*Institutes*: book 4, chapter 1, part 3).

Worship creates and sustains the Church. So, as we try to listen for God speaking to us through the Church, maybe we do well to attend to our shared adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication? Far more than punctuation to bracket the real business of our meeting, worship is one of the most profound ways we have of offering ourselves into the presence of God and opening ourselves to the Word.

Amongst the many, many things on the agenda of the URC, on your agenda as Mission Council, can we wonder about our worship? How do we sustain our worshipping life and worshipping communities? How do we encourage and equip those who craft and lead our worship? How do we appreciate the rich treasures of worship we inherit from the past, and discover ways in which worship can be ever renewed and renewing?

Mark 14 launches us into worship thoughts. But God might have more to say to us as we listen in on the Church. I invite you to this painting. Those who know me will feel it boringly inevitable that I would shoe horn artwork into my three opportunities to share with you this week. Somewhere in the editing maybe, boring predictability was left off the list of gifts of the Spirit. Maybe. I wanted to get art into your hands not least because I imagine this week will be a week of many words. Take these paintings with you too. Maybe they'll let scripture and God speak afresh again and again in the coming days.

We'll share three paintings by the German Roman Catholic priest artist Sieger Köder. I love his work. When he died, Sister Gemma Simmonds wrote of his paintings: "They express a distinctively earthy theological and spiritual interpretation of biblical... themes, and a warm, inclusive ecclesiology, very much in line with that of Pope Francis. There is challenge, anger, humour and deep tenderness in his depictions of biblical scenes, and always an eye for the human response to God's communication." Köder himself once said: "I hope I can preach with each painting, not just make pictures." I think he does both, superbly.

What else is God saying to us through the Church? God is saying that we can love the little bit of the Church that we know. We can treasure our traditions. We can name our own saints. Every congregation, let alone denomination, has them. But we can never know it all; never name all there is to name of the ways and will of God. Here is a dead German Roman Catholic priest preaching to us. At times, our ecumenical vocation is a heavy burden. Some would say it has even been a diversion, blinding us to mission, turning us into permanently disappointed brides and grooms jilted at the altar by other denominations who will always walk away from us.

Certainly, we carry plenty of hurt at ecumenical failures. Ecumenical winter can be a very cold place indeed for ecumenists like us. I share in a Federation of 11 theological partners in Cambridge embracing Islam and Judaism alongside the mosaic of Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans and the Orthodox. That hasn't made life easy, not least for me personally. It has, however, made life faithful. I would have it no other way. How can I listen to Jesus inviting me to receive his very life, if I rest content when that life is torn asunder and twisted into cantons of Christianity?

So listening to God through the Church must attune us to ecumenical voices. A week or so ago, David Cornick, formerly Principal of Westminster College, General Secretary of the URC and, most recently, of Churches Together in England, received a special award from the Archbishop of Canterbury for his ecumenical service. Responding, David said:

"The citation draws attention to the vision of unity which the URC holds at its centre, and that my ministry and perceptions were rooted there. So, I hope all those in the URC who have been quietly working through the years to make local ecumenism work will feel that my recognition is theirs too." Sometimes we will hear deeply challenging things from our sisters and brothers in Christ; criticism and shock perhaps. But we will also hear love and affirmation. God speaks.

Köder often avoids directly painting the face of Jesus. We glimpse his reflection in the wine and see his hands passing out bread. It is his impact upon others that Köder paints. That's what listening to God through the Church can bless us with.

We will hear other notes sounding as we listen. Our painting brings the shadow of the cross onto the table, as if Jesus himself is casting it. And the unleavened bread is broken in a Chi Roh (like a P and an X); the first two letters in Greek of Christos. The Passover sacrifice is gaining a new layer of meaning. The walls seem to crowd in upon them as they huddle together.

A week or so ago an interim report by the Bishop of Truro highlighted the scale of religious persecution today. Christians turn out to be the world's most persecuted religious community, and the report speaks of something like genocide taking place in parts of the Middle East and North Africa, Christianity's cradle. In Sri Lanka, this Easter became the day of catastrophe, as churches were included in the suicide bombers' targets.

What will it mean for us to listen to God speaking through the tears and cries and silence of our persecuted sisters and brothers? How does that change our own faithfulness?

There's something more about the way these disciples are gathered around the table. There is very little room for anyone else to join them. This table is full and excluding.

We may not face anything like the persecution of some others in the Body of Christ. But we can create churches that are inward-looking, isolated and isolating. Instead of hospitality, sometimes the Church can offer hostility. Instead of being a beacon of hope, shining with the light of the glory of God revealed in Christ, churches can be fortresses of self-preservation. Instead of welcoming all, churches can seem to welcome only a few. Perhaps the voices we hear from congregations echo with pain and distress, with a sense of being overwhelmed or under resourced? Perhaps we hear sadness at loss. How might any of that touch today's agenda for you?

Just over a week ago, I lost someone I never met, but whose writing and faithfulness have increasingly blessed me. I suspect she will have blessed some of you too. Rachel Held Evans was just 37 when she died. In her books, on the internet and at conferences, she opened up what Church might truly be. She wrote:

“...the gospel doesn’t need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, ‘Welcome! There’s bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk.’ This isn’t a kingdom for the worthy; it’s a kingdom for the hungry.” (*Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, 2015).

What more is God saying to us through the Church? Here’s a final thing I notice in the painting. Look how varied the disciples are. Those closest to Jesus are either giving him their rapt attention or seem lost in prayer. There’s one at the far left corner of the table who looks asleep, and, beside him, one who might be terrified. There’s one watching in shock as Judas slips out the door. There’s Judas himself, slipping away from light into darkness.

When we listen to God speaking through the Church, I doubt we hear one unified voice. We hear cacophony. We hear deep faith and some faithlessness. We hear laughter and weeping. We hear high hopes and stifling cynicism. We hear awe and we hear complacency. We hear love and we hear cruelty. We hear, of course, from the jumbled up messy mass of ordinary sinners that we are. We hear ourselves.

Maybe, we think, it would be a lot easier if we had a bit more command and control; a bit more benevolent dictatorship. Being a conciliar church can really suck sometimes. It can make us painfully slow. It can trap us into extreme caution. You’re about to have another go at being the Body of Christ in council.

I think it’s worth giving it everything you’ve got, being magnificent, precisely because Jesus lands up in the midst of a messy bunch of ordinary people. If God wanted command and control, God could have done that. Instead, we get these open hands that reach out to us and say: “Take, this is my body... This is my blood...”

In remembrance and in obedience, in all we do today, to God be the glory. Amen.