

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Chrism Eucharist 28 March 2024

Luke 22: 24-30

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Sermon by the Rt Reverend Dr Martin Seeley

So this year, unlike last, I haven't felt I needed to change the Gospel reading. Luke has done it for us. This scene, the dispute among the disciples, happens in Matthew and Mark's Gospels while Jesus and his disciples are on the road towards Jerusalem, and right after Jesus has predicted the passion for the third time, saying he would be condemned to death, handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, flogged, and crucified and on the third day will rise again.

Then Matthew and Luke – in slightly different forms – relay the dispute among the disciples, as a response to the perplexing, distressing words about Jesus' death.

Luke takes the whole scene of the dispute and moves it lock stock and barrel into the last supper. Which is precisely where we are today, in the midst of sharing in that same meal, and this is where the dispute happens. When you look at Luke 22 – and it's a long chapter, 70 verses long - the sequence begins with the chief priests looking for a way to kill Jesus, then Judas provides that way by doing his deadly deal, Jesus sends Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal, the apostles sit with Jesus for the meal, the offering of the bread, and the cup – in fact in Luke, the offering of the cup, then the bread, then the cup again - and the command to do as we are doing here today, in remembrance of him.

Then Jesus announces his betrayer is among them and the apostles wonder whom it might be, which leads to the dispute and today's gospel reading. That's followed by Jesus' prediction of Simon Peter's betrayal, going out to the mount of Olives, Judas' betrayal, the arrest, Peter's betrayal, and then to the high priest's house.

For us today, what Luke has given us is the timely setting for the dispute among the apostles, this very setting, the eucharist, in the midst of the drama that makes the church. We mustn't imagine a scene of languid tranquillity as the disciples lounge back, passing morsels of bread to each other. The air was intense. This is Jerusalem at Passover, at night.

And in this gathering they knew something terrible was about to happen even if they had yet to have understood Jesus' plain words of prediction, and all of Jesus' words at this meal point to that end, and to this being the last time they would share this meal together. So the air is intense, the atmosphere febrile. The anxiety and perplexity is palpable. And that leads to conflict, to dispute, to arguments.

The anxiety and perplexity is palpable, in the room and outside. And don't we know that. And it leads to disputes. We know that too. So with whom are we each in dispute right now. Who am I in dispute with right now. I don't mean your treasurer or your grumpy neighbour – I mean in this room – who in this room are you in dispute with right now?

And if you say, no one, what is he daring to suggest!, how about, who are you feeling a little bit jealous of, or a teeny bit superior to, or whom have you spotted and wondered who on earth they are and why do they look so confident, or who is that person over there and why are they here? We've all done it. We are all doing it.

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A dispute in our minds – a little mental competition about who is the greatest. Which sometimes expresses itself in words and actions. The things we say, the things we do, the social media posts we send, the meetings we conveniently miss, the sly word about this person or that. Yes, I know, we are better than that, but we also can be as bad as that.

Competition, insecurity, false confidence is heightened, as for the apostles, in a time of anxiety – not just the church's faithless anxiety about its own existence with its preoccupation about its own numbers – but the wider world's deep anxiety, its fragmentation, alienation, fear. We play that out in the church, of course we do, because that's how we can be agents of healing, of reconciliation, if we embody the world's distress. But we have to own it and own up to it, and act to let the Spirit heal it

The church notoriously embroils herself in disputes, embodying the world's anxiety. My theology is better than yours. My biblical interpretation is better than yours. My liturgical sense is better than yours. My missionary zeal is better than yours. And we institutionalise it in our tribes, each feeling just a little bit superior to the others.

Back to the text: helpfully for us, Luke does not do what Mark or Matthew do. They blame specific people for the dispute. Mark blames James and John; Matthew, shockingly, can't even do that and blames of all people their mother. Luke, I think gets it right and simply says, "a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest" - and so holds us all responsible. It is about all of us embodying, participating in, manifesting, the world's distress; and all of us being party to anxiety-driven argument.

And so what does Jesus say? He doesn't say stop arguing. He paints a picture, first of how not to be, don't be like the rulers of the Gentiles, those in authority, lording it over others.

The Greek, *ethnon*, means group of people, tribe, and just came to mean Gentile or heathen in Christian usage. Jesus is saying, everyone else – look at them, don't be like them.

So if not like them then how? Jesus goes on, "But not so with you". This can mean two things and it must mean both. "With you it is not so" and "for you, it is not to be so." A present reality and expectation. Right now, with me Jesus, it is not so, and so it will not be so from now on. For us it is a present reality and an expectation that it become more so, more the reality. It is quite simply, for them, the apostles, and for us, their successors, a call to be different, and we have to learn that. Practice, model it, modelling ourselves on Jesus.

And here Jesus is sitting with the apostles, around the table, leaning on couches, eating the Passover meal. He continues, "the greatest person at this table right now" Jesus says, "is the one serving. And I am among you as one who serves". John's Gospel gives us this in the most extraordinary form, in the washing of feet, and we will practice that tonight.

So what does serving each other look like? Jesus is talking to us. Be as those who serve. He is saying this to his apostles to be this to each other. So what is our disposition to one another? To the one whom we are jealous about, or the one whom we are feeling a little bit superior to, or the one who just gets up our nose, or the one who thinks crazy things about the bible.

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What are we to do? We are to serve one another. Before we go outside into the hurly burly of the streets of Bury St Edmunds, here, right now, in this place, around this table, sharing this meal he is serving us, we are to serve one another – in our hearts, in our minds, in our feelings, in our thinking, and most of all, in our actions.

It feels and looks like love. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you”. That is how we are to be, and not in some great grand demonstration, my love is better than your love kind of way, or patronizingly, “here, let me help you”. Yuk. But quietly, unobtrusively, actively, in our hearts and our acts and actions with each other, as Paul says, regarding others as better than ourselves. It means paying attention to each other, being honest, open, vulnerable.

In this time of the world’s deep anxiety and disturbance, in the church’s mirroring of that anxiety and disturbance, in a time of dispute and argument, it is a time to be different, and to be that with each other – to care for each other, to look out for one another, to recognise that God has called each one of us to be here and for a reason and has not “un-called” any of us, and because of that we are to serve one another, in prayer, in love and kind actions, even towards those we are really not sure about. Be like Jesus, serving one another. How we are with one another is part of our vocation.

After the apostles in dispute and Jesus exhorting them to serve one another, there is a third section to this gospel reading. An eschatological section, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The early church’s eschatological hope, and our hope, that there will be community in the world to come, and that all will share in the banquet, those who have persevered with him to the end.

The New Testament speaks of the apostles in two ways. On the one hand they are entrusted with a mission, by definition, sent out and dispersed in the world. That is what an apostle is for. That is what we are for.

But, on the other hand, there is an eschatological role for the apostles, understood not as dispersed but as gathered – the eschaton after all requires gathering, not dispersal, of the people of God from the ends of the earth into one place. So the apostles become a visible, indivisible community gathered around Jesus anticipating the eschaton.

Here the apostles, are then not those who follow Christ but those who surround him. And this is what we are doing. We are they, here in this place, around this table, around the one who serves us. We are they, ordained and lay, called by the one who serves, not at this moment to be scattered across the glorious county of Suffolk but gathered in the even more glorious community of those bound together by the one who calls us, to be a sign of God’s future for this world and the next. Of course the eucharist is always eschatological, is always a sign of hope. And here, today, in this place, around this table, in his presence, we become that eschatological reality, that sign for the church and the world.

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Our disputes are the world's disputes; our response is to serve one another as Jesus serves us, and so to serve the world for its healing and peace, and we gather to be that sign of hope and the reality that sign signifies – a new community of love for one another.

Maundy Thursday. Novum mandatum. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples".

Let us love one another and pray for one another.

Please pray for me.

Amen.