

**Date:** 21st April 2011

**Sermon:** Rev Dr Brenda Robson

**Reading:** Mark 14 : 12 – 26 *The Last Supper*

Christianity has featured very prominently in the news this past week, several times in fact. Not Jesus, he wasn't mentioned much if at all, just religion.

Headlines about the appalling acts of violence directed towards Catholic associates of Celtic football club, cowardly and evil letter bombs. The UEFA president commented yesterday that religion should keep out of football and sport. But we know as Christians that the people who commit such acts, on both sides of the so called religious divide, do not know Jesus, do not act in the name of Jesus. The BBC news the other night showed a certain minister in Aberdeen greeting people at his church door. The media interest will build up into a frenzy as this year's General Assembly approaches – not with excitement to hear about the work of the church as it seeks to spread the gospel message throughout the land but in anticipation of the church imploding over the issue of homosexuality and ministry. And in several newspapers this week, a debate about the Lord's Supper. The debate is not new, it has been going on for centuries – when and what was the the last supper?

A book was published this week – by Professor Sir Colin Humphries – The Mystery of the Last Supper. Was it a Passover meal (Matthew, Mark and Luke) or was it before the Passover (John)? The professor has decided that John and Jesus used a different calendar from Matthew, Mark and Luke. John and Jesus used an old Jewish calendar used by the Jews before the Exodus, i.e. when they were still slaves in Egypt hundreds of years previously. The month started with the last sighting of the month's waning moon and the day started at sunset.

The other gospel writers used the official calendar of the time of Jesus, of their time. The month started with the first sighting of the new waxing moon and from sunrise. Don't worry too much if you don't exactly follow this. The professor worked out that the last supper was on Wednesday April 1<sup>st</sup> AD 33 - and so he argues that Easter Sunday should always be fixed on the first Sunday of April. Now, I'm not sure why John and Jesus would have used an outdated calendar, rather than the calendar of the day. I suppose I would have to read the professor's book to find out but I can't say I'm too enthusiastic about doing that.

Does it really matter all that much when the meal took place and what kind of meal it was? Is it not enough to know that this was the last time Jesus sat down to eat with his friends? Is it not more important that Jesus replaced the Passover with a new sacrament, a new memorial, a new covenant with the people which to be for all time?

Having this last meal with his disciples was very important to Jesus. Luke records Jesus saying to the disciples during the meal "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

John's gospel records Jesus teaching at great length during the meal, the other gospel writers focus on the first communion, the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine.

I wonder about the mystery surrounding the place where Jesus and the disciples will eat. The disciples ask a perfectly reasonable question of Jesus – where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover? If we are arranging to eat with a group of friends, we will give them the address of the house or the restaurant, nowadays we will also give them the postcode too for their sat navs. Instead Jesus gave them a riddle. He spoke to only two of his disciples - Verse 13. **He said go into the city and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters "The Teacher asks: where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"**

Why the secrecy? I wonder if Jesus wanted to ensure that this meal took place, that he was not betrayed too soon? In the verses immediately before the Lord's supper we read **Judas Iscariot one of the twelve, went to the Chief Priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.**

If Judas had known the place of this meal, he might have betrayed Jesus there and then, bringing the guards to the house. As it was, Jesus arrived at the house with the twelve, Judas among them, and presumably most of the twelve did not know where they were going.

It was important for Jesus to have this last supper with his friends. What love and compassion he had for them. He knew what grief they were about to experience when they would see him crucified, dead and buried in a tomb. He loved them unconditionally, he had shared his life with them for three years, taught them all that he could, moulded them and shaped them and prepared them for the life ahead of them when he was gone from their sight. He knew that they would suffer in the days that lay ahead, he knew that they would all, with the exception of John, meet violent deaths, laying down their lives for his sake. And his heart must have ached for them, just as the heart of a parent aches for her children if she knows that she is seriously ill and might not live to see them grow.

My friend Jane was diagnosed with breast cancer many years ago when her two boys were about 4 and 6 years old. She received treatment and was well for about three years until the cancer returned, having spread to her lungs and hip bones. Her boys were about 7 and 9 and she was told that with aggressive treatment she might get another three years.

Jane had a deep Christian faith, she never feared death herself because she knew that Jesus was with her and would always be with her – but she was heartbroken that she would leave her children. It was her prayer – the prayer of all her friends – that she would live long enough to see her children grow to adulthood. She had lots of treatment, she had some good times, there were times the doctors were amazed when tumours unexpectedly shrunk. And always we prayed for time.

Jane died three years ago next month and her boys were then 20 and 22. Yes they were heartbroken but Jane knew that she had shaped them and guided them and prepared them for life without her. She was told she had 3 years and she lived another 13 years, she always said that her faith and prayers sustained her. Her faith and hope and love were an inspiration to those who knew her and her memory continues to inspire.

Jesus had the same love and concern for his friends, a desire to strengthen them and comfort them in the struggles they would face without his physical presence. And not just his friends around that table with him, but also all those believers who would follow him down through the years, the centuries, followers who had not walked and talked and dined with him, followers who knew him through faith and the Holy Spirit. And so he wanted to leave them with a memorial of him, an act of remembrance.

Memorials keep memories alive, they connect us to the one we no longer see but hold in our hearts.

We have been hearing about Richmond Hope in church recently and we are collecting pound coins to support their work. Richmond Hope is a counselling service for bereaved children and young people, based in Richmond Craigmillar Church. I spent six months with Liz Henderson at Richmond Craigmillar in the early days of Richmond's Hope. The charity was set up because the minster was conducting so many funeral services for young adults who had died through addictions and violence, leaving behind grieving children. Children were losing parents and also big brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins.

A big focus of the work with bereaved children is making memory boxes. Children decorate a box, usually a big shoe box, and then gather mementoes, little things that would remind the child of the person he had lost. It is always moving when a child shows me his memory box – there might be photographs, a necklace, a birthday card, a pressed flower, a hairbrush, a drawing.

Usually the counsellors help the children to gather items week by week. Some remarkable parents have helped their children to make up their boxes if they knew that they would not have long with them.

And so it was with Jesus. Jesus put into the memory box two simple, everyday items, items that would be available in every home, bread and wine. And he said to his brothers and sisters that every time they ate of the bread and drank of the wine, they did so in memory of him. Not just in memory of Jesus' life on earth and all that he did. A child's memory box is about the past life the child had with a loved one. Jesus memory box is about his death and resurrection. Our knowledge of God comes through Jesus' teaching and example, our salvation comes through his suffering on the cross for our sins, his death and burial, his resurrection to life on the third day. If Jesus had turned away in the Garden of Gethesemane, if he had fled back to Galilee, we would still be lost. Our salvation is rooted in his broken body and shed blood, in the bread and the wine.

And so we come to his table, to the love feast which he has prepared for us. Let us promise to stand with Jesus tomorrow as he faces his accusers, to walk with him along the Via Dolorosa, to stand at the foot of the cross in awe and wonder, as Jesus

makes all things new and opens the gates of heaven for each one us. If we take that journey with Jesus tomorrow then great will be our joy on Easter Sunday as the Lord is risen, the Lord is risen indeed!  
AMEN