

The Last Supper (Matthew's story)

Study Three



Mary Anoints Jesus, Ilyas Basim Khuri Bazzi Rahib, 1684

Opening Chat...

How well do you cope with stress and have you found ways of dealing with situations causing symptoms of stress that work for you?

Key verse...

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'
(Matthew 26:26)

The plot against Jesus ...

(Read Matthew 26:1-16)

Matthew provides a bit of a timeline here in telling us that Passover is two days away, which would make this Tuesday evening and the end of a long teaching session with the disciples on the Mount of Olives. In Matthew's presentation we have Jesus, the Messiah, Son of Man, Judge of all (Matthew 16:27) facing judgement. He has already told the disciples that his time on earth is short and he faces arrest and death, and now reveals that it will be during the Passover celebrations.

But this will be a voluntary sacrifice that the Apostle Paul later recognised when calling Jesus 'our Passover lamb'. The leaders, including the High Priest Caiaphas, dare not act now, worried about the increasing popularity of Jesus. God is in control.

So, we find Jesus in the home of Simon the Leper and being anointed by Mary (identified in John's gospel) with an expensive jar of perfume. Both Mark and John tell us that this was an extract of nard, not a typical oil used around the house (as we might find a fragrant

candle) but more for solemn occasions such as funerals. The disciples recognise the perfume for its worth and question what seems to them to be a poor use of a valuable item (a year's salary for the average worker).

Judas is the one who articulates their thoughts – that she could have sold this and given the money to the poor rather than poured over Jesus' head and feet.

We are not told about Mary's motives, but perhaps she has heard rumours from friends in Jerusalem about the possible fate of Jesus and wants to create a special moment.

This is an act of love, of worship and sacrifice from Mary, thankful for what he has done for their family and for who she believes him to be. Jesus appreciates this action as one full of significance, the beginning of preparations for his funeral.

The decision of Judas to betray Jesus is probably the only incident that occurs on the Wednesday of Holy Week. This man was one

of Jesus' closest followers, being trained to become leaders of the church, but now he indulges in treachery.

The amount of money that changes hand is not huge, the price of a slave gored to death by an ox (Exodus 21:32), which perhaps shows

the value Judas now places on Jesus. His motives are unclear, but the act ensures his place in history.

Discussion...

- 1: Could Jesus have done any more to prepare his disciples for what was about to happen? Based on your own understanding of the story to this point in time, what had they seen Jesus do and say?
 - 2: Do the disciples have a point in their response to Mary's use of the perfume, and how would you see yourself acting in a similar, if hypothetical, situation?
 - 3: So, what might have been going through the mind of Judas?
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Supper together...

(Read Matthew 26:17-30)

What do we need to do if planning to share a meal with friends? This is Passover, and the requirements are anything but simple. Toward mid-afternoon on the Thursday sacrificial lambs would be taken to the temple court.

After sunset households would gather in a house to eat the Passover lamb, roasted with bitter herbs. There would be a thanksgiving for the day and the wine, a preliminary course of greens and bitter herbs, followed by an explanation of

the symbolic meal, singing, a second cup of wine, then the main course followed by a third 'cup of blessing' accompanied by prayer, singing and probably a fourth cup of wine.

So, the disciples head into the city at Jesus' request to find the man chosen to be their host, and from there, to begin their preparations in a room in his house. Come sunset, we find Jesus



Simon Ushakov, Last Supper, 1685

reclining at the table with the twelve and whilst they eat, he drops the bombshell that one of those around the table will betray him! Jesus' choice of this moment, with his closest friends gathered in fellowship, only emphasises the enormity of the betrayal and causes much distress. There is an inevitability in the death of Jesus, but that does not excuse the action of Judas.

The words 'this is my body' accompanying the breaking of bread by Jesus are not part of the Passover ritual, but would grow in understanding after Easter. They speak of sacrifice.

As the bread is broken, so the body of Jesus will be broken. We can say the same for the

sharing of the cup, with the fermented grape juice resembling the blood pouring from the Passover lambs in the temple. Jesus equates this spilling of blood with the word 'covenant', showing his understanding of how his life and death connect with the prophetic words of the past (Exodus 24:8, Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The first Passover meal was about hope of deliverance and a promised land. Jesus' words are also about hope of deliverance and life in the kingdom of God.

Following the traditional hymn at the end of the meal, they get up from the table and make their way to the Mount of Olives.

Discussion...

- 4: What does verse 18 tell you about Jesus?
 - 5: The ritual of the Passover meal was familiar to the disciples. Are there particular meals that can remind you of times gone by, and emotionally, what does the remembrance bring?
 - 6: What can the act of sharing a meal together around a table with family or friends offer that a TV dinner perhaps cannot?
 - 7: How easy do you find the sharing of bread and wine at communion enables you to think about the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples, and if you had a say in such matters, would you like to do it differently?
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A place called Gethsemane ...

(Read Matthew 26:31-46)

Jesus does not want the disciples to face what is about to happen without some preparation. The failure of the Twelve to stop Judas shows that even at that moment they had not taken in what was to happen, perhaps thinking that Jesus would use his supernatural powers to save himself. But Jesus knows it is going to be a dark and potentially dangerous situation that they will find themselves in, and he

wants them to understand that although they all run away, that will not prevent him from 'going ahead of them' and waiting for them in Galilee after he has risen. There is genuine shock among the disciples at these words. They are still in denial about the approaching danger and Peter receives a stern warning that in the next few hours even he will deny Jesus three times.

Gethsemane was a garden with olive trees and olive presses, located somewhere on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. It was one of Jesus' favourite spots when he wanted to be alone. However, this time he takes three of his closest disciples with him, perhaps so they might learn something of the depths of suffering he was about to experience.

Jesus could have chosen somewhere different that night to foil the plans of Judas, but he chose not to walk away from the fate that awaited him.

Jesus asks them to stay awake, perhaps so they might also spend time in prayerful support or be on lookout duty. Then he goes a little further so he can be alone with his heavenly Father, only to return and find all the disciples asleep. But there is no anger in his words, just a recognition of the trials they are going to have to face over the next few days.

'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'



Agony in the garden, Andrea Mantegna, 1455

Discussion...

- 8: What must the disciples have gone through emotionally during that meal?
 - 9: Could Jesus not have presented himself to the authorities in the morning and saved a lot of heartache and trouble for his followers?
 - 10: Can you feel the emotion in Gethsemane as you read the story? Perhaps rather than answering a question here, you might like to spend a few moments prayerfully thinking and responding to what you have read.
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For prayer...

Pray for all whose hearts are burdened by anxiety and fear, for themselves and others, that they might find healing and peace.