

Maundy Thursday April 1st:

The Disciple whom Jesus loved: [John 13:1-30](#): 'Lord, who is it?'



*Mensa Christi (Table of Christ)
Church, Galilee*

All of us have special people in our lives; our closest family and friends, those with whom we have a very special bond. It shouldn't therefore be a surprise that 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (v 23) had a particularly close and warm relationship with him. This disciple isn't mentioned very often and all his appearances, of which this is the first, are towards the end of John's Gospel. His identification with the writer of John (or at least the written testimony on which the book is based) has led many to conclude that he is John himself but there can

be no certainty about this.

The occasion for today's reading is the Last Supper. John does not actually describe the meal as such (the other three Gospels do) but it is without doubt the same occasion. By washing the disciples' feet – something they found acutely uncomfortable – Jesus has illustrated the nature of his own servant ministry as well as providing them with an example to follow in their own future Christian service (v 15).

Then comes the bombshell; there is a betrayer in the house. The shock is palpable (v 22). They obviously want to know who it is and Peter, rather than making an approach himself, has a word with the beloved disciple about asking Jesus to identify the traitor, which he duly does (v 23-25). I think we have to imagine a pretty febrile atmosphere with all sorts of loud conversations going on with people talking across one another left, right and centre. Peter may well have asked the beloved disciple to find out who it was simply because he was the one sitting next to Jesus meaning that all he had to do was lean back and quietly whisper. In the midst of the hubbub Judas is identified by Jesus and leaves before the disciples have had a chance to understand what is going on.

I wonder also, perhaps unconsciously, whether Peter asks the beloved disciple because he considered him above suspicion given his bond of friendship with Jesus. Of course it wasn't only Judas that was to betray Jesus that night; Peter was also about to have the most traumatic experience of his life thus far as Jesus is arrested and he finds himself, racked with fear for his own life, unable to admit any association with him. This was a traumatic night for everybody; even Jesus himself recoils in terror from what he is being asked to do in his dark night of the soul in the Garden of Gethsemane.

On a night when Jesus pleaded, Judas was on the make and Peter lost his bottle it seems that everything that the disciples thought they knew was being turned upside down. It was one thing to follow Jesus around Galilee watching him teach and heal but the trauma of his arrest put into question everything they had lived for over the past three years or so. So, they might well have asked themselves, was it all wrong and is it going to cost me my life?

There are moments in our lives when we question everything we thought we knew. An event that we didn't see coming; a medical diagnosis, a bereavement, the breakdown of a relationship, the loss of a job or even (or especially) a pandemic can make us ask questions that we didn't know needed answering and cause us immense mental, emotional and spiritual distress. If we are Christians it can lead us to seriously question our faith. How could God have allowed this to happen? Where was he when I needed him? Why doesn't he answer my prayers? What hope is there for the future?

It's important to remember that these were actually the sort of questions the disciples, including the beloved disciple, were asking that dark night. For him Jesus was a greatly loved friend, mentor, guide and teacher. To find that one of his fellow disciples was a betrayer was in itself difficult to bear but the heartbreak of seeing Jesus being crucified must have felt like having his own hands and feet pierced. Yet he was there when Jesus died, the beloved friend and follower to whom Jesus entrusts his mother (John 19 v 26-27). He shared the fear and confusion of his fellow disciples and yet had sought out Jesus' mother and accompanied her to the cross in spite of the cost to him of doing so.

The beloved disciple stands for us as an example of faith, love and loyalty that is so deeply rooted that even when life threw at him the worst thing that could possibly happen he wasn't so overwhelmed that he ran for his life without a look over his shoulder. The cost of seeing the back that he had leaned against a couple of days before raw from flogging and against the rough wood of the cross was enormous yet his integrity remained intact, something recognised by Jesus in his request. He was still the reliable and loving friend even though he too must have thought that his own life was falling apart. It's no coincidence that when he and Peter ran to Jesus' tomb on the Sunday morning that the instant he caught sight of the strips of linen and burial cloth folded up 'he saw and believed' (John 20 v 8). It suggests to me that he had never quite given up, that there was a place in the depths of his heart that was waiting for something like this; a sign of hope that it had not just all ended in failure. He so wanted there to be more to the future than trying to pick up the pieces and carry on with a life that had lost all meaning.

I've talked with many people over the years who have come to a point in their lives when they have seriously questioned or even abandoned their faith. I wonder if the beloved disciple offers us a way of continuing to embrace our faith even though we may feel there isn't much evidence that God is around or cares about us. We may sometimes feel that God is silent yet I think this loving follower had a faith that survived somewhere in the deep places of his heart which is where God's wordless often presence is to be found.

It took a lot to keep even a sliver a faith when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Judas was certainly one who couldn't compute what was happening. There are those who believe that he had links with zealots who believed that armed insurgence was the only way forward and that when Jesus talked about suffering and dying something within him snapped and his faith that Jesus was leading him down the right path evaporated. Yet suffering and dying are integral parts of our faith. Being a Christian doesn't mean that only good things will

happen to us or that there will never be moments of doubt, confusion, pain and loss. What we do know is that they never speak the final word. That final word, as the beloved disciple well knew, is love; and because Christ is risen and he was able to see and believe, so we can believe that there is nothing in heaven and earth that can separate us from that love.

Questions: Have there been times in your own life when events have made you question your faith? How can we keep the faith at such times?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we reflect on the terrible events that led to your death help us to see the thread of love that runs through them as you walk the way of the cross for us. Amen.

