

There are a number of stories surrounding the lives of the various disciples after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some are obvious the stuff of legend, others one likes to think at least have their origins in the lives of these very ordinary, extraordinary men whom Jesus called to follow, to continue his work..

One that has always appealed to me concerns the figure of John, associated with the writing of the Fourth Gospel and at least the first of the letters of John and by tradition linked with the beloved disciple, the one who sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper, the one who Jesus, as he died, entrusted with the care of his mother, who accompanied Peter to the tomb when Mary Magdalene came with the news of the empty tomb that first Easter morning.

Again tradition would have it that he was the only one of the disciples to die a natural death, indeed the last of the disciples to die. In his latter days he was associated with the city of Ephesus. The core of his later teaching was the simple command, ‘Little children, love one another’. As this, the last of the living links with Jesus, was dying, his followers asked what was his last word to the Church. The old man said simply, ‘Little children, love one another.’ ‘Master, we know that; what else have you to say?’ ‘Little children, love one another,’

It is a story that encapsulates for me much of the teaching the Fourth Gospel, of the First Letter of John. The theme of love is a thread that runs through these writings.

God is love.

Greater love has no man than this.

Love is the fulfilling of the Law.

Love is essentially relational, directed away from oneself towards the other. One definition of Christian love, *αγαπη* love, that I have always liked is love as ‘wishing the very best for the other’. At its best, love is relational, love is also reciprocal; the lover is

also the beloved. Jesus speaks of the love that he and the Father have for one another exemplified in his love for us. The former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, talks of Jesus ‘as the face of God towards us’; picking up words we find in the Fourth Gospel, ‘Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father.’ That reciprocal love of the Father for the Son, of Jesus for us, is a model for our love for one another.

This calls to mind another key New Testament concept encapsulated in the Greek word, *κοινωνία*, from which we derive words like ‘communion’, ‘ecumenism’. It is one of those Greek words that is hard to encompass in a single English word. In the Greek New Testament it operates on a number of levels.

It operates at a basic level of fellowship. So we read in the 1st Letter of John,:

‘We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father, and with his son Jesus Christ.’ *1 John 1.3*

That fellowship has at its core a shared belief and commitment to God in Christ. As such that fellowship, that *κοινωνία*, transcends all barriers of race, of class, of culture. One of the defining features of that fellowship is that of worship. Worship is not an optional extra, engaged in by the enthusiastic few, it lies at the core of the life of the community.

So as we are reminded in Acts, from the very outset:

‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.’ *Acts 2.42*

The teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. The breaking of bread was an integral part of that worship. So much so that early propaganda against the early Church was that it engaged in a sort of ritual cannibalism, eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ.

The communion, the eucharist, the breaking of bread has always been one of the defining acts of the Christian Church. On occasions it has been abused, it has been misunderstood, it has been an occasion of scandal, but this shared encounter in the bread and the wine with the living Christ and with one another has been at the heart of Christian worship from its earliest days. Paul reflects on this in writing to the Church at Corinth.

‘Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the Body of Christ?’ *1Cor 10.16*

Paul leaves an ambiguity in his writing between the Body of Christ in terms of the presence of Christ and the Body of Christ as the Church, the worshipping community.

At some point this shared encounter impinges upon my own spiritual journey. I often remark that the very core of the Gospel is proclaimed in very individual terms at the communion rails:

Draw near with faith.

Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you,
and his blood which he shed for you.

Remember that he died for you,
and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving

The Body of Christ keep you in eternal life.

We are drawn into a deeper knowledge of Christ, a deeper relationship with Christ, an imitation of Christ; in which our lives are to bear something of the mark of his life, his self offering and self emptying love. And so Paul, in his writing to the Philippians confesses a desire to:

‘to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing (the *κοινωνία*) of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’ *Phil 3:10*

Of course this fellowship, this *κοινωνία*, with the crucified and risen Christ is not given for our own spiritual self gratification. We who have experienced God's love in Christ are called to show God's love in the world in which we find ourselves. So the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells his readers:

‘Do not forget to do good and to share (to fellowship) with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased’ *Hebrews 13.16*

As I said, I have always liked that story of John, beloved disciple, custodian of Mary, the mother of Jesus, evangelist and witness to the faith and his simple command ‘Little children, love one another.’

We as a community have gathered for fellowship, for *κοινωνία* with one another and for worship. May our hearts be open to one another and to the God and Christ we encounter in this place in word, in prayer, in bread and wine. As we prepare to go out from this place to our homes and neighbourhoods, our offices and places of work and recreation, let us resolve this week to bring something of that same self emptying, self forgetting love that we have known in Christ. ‘Little children, love one another.’