

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
EASTER 3
SUNDAY 4 MAY 2014
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Psalm 116, Luke 24: 13-35

“In the Beginning was the Meal”



These last two weeks, we have read the resurrection account as we find it in Matthew’s gospel. We’ve discovered the way Matthew tells these stories is heavily influenced by his background and the audience the gospel was intended for in the first place. Jewish themes dominate Matthew, from the very beginning to the very end.

The writer of Matthew projects Jesus’ story on the larger canvas of the scriptures, the culture, the faith and the hopes of the Jewish people. Important figures like Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David and Solomon are used as a template to help tell the story of Jesus. The idea of a promised Messiah; the hope for a new Davidic King who will restore Israel to its former glory; and the borrowing of language and imagery from the apocalyptic literature genre that was popular among Jewish religious people at the time, all help broaden and deepen the story as Matthew tells it, connecting it to thousands of years of faith practice and understanding.

The backdrop for Luke’s gospel is very different, and so are his resurrection stories. The one we read today, the story of the journey to Emmaus and the story immediately following this, where the resurrected Jesus meets his friends at a meal in an upper room in Jerusalem, are unique to Luke. And not only that, if you put them alongside each other, you will discover they follow the same pattern: Conversation with each other, Jesus appears, He is not recognised, Jesus teaches them on the basis of scripture, Jesus is recognised in the breaking of bread, Jesus disappears, the disciples return to Jerusalem.

Matthew borrows from the enthronement ritual of the King, as it is found in the psalms and other parts of scripture. He situates his final scene on a mountain, bringing to mind mountain stories about Abraham, Moses and Elijah, and echoing with words from the prophets about the nations being welcomed to the mountain of the Lord at the end of time. Luke, however, tells a very different story.

In Luke, there is no mountain in sight. Not at the end of the gospel, not at the beginning of Acts, and not even, which is really significant, when Luke tells us about the beatitudes. Where in Matthew, the disciples receive the new law and their commissioning from a Jesus that is modelled on Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai, Luke makes it specifically clear that Jesus is not on a mountain. Not for the beatitudes, and not for the ascension.

In Matthew, Jesus is up there with the giants of the Jewish faith. In contrast, in Luke, he is, very literally, on the same level as everybody else – sharing, teaching, healing, talking, joining the conversations, taking part in a meal, meeting people where they are, with a special bias towards the marginalised.

From the girl Mary, to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, to the people who gather around him to listen to his teachings, to his resurrection appearances, in Luke we consistently find Jesus at a level with the rest of humanity around him. His Jewish heritage is important in Luke, but not as domineering as it is in Matthew.

Luke puts his Jesus not predominantly in the framework of his Jewish heritage, he puts him in the much broader framework of the history of the world. Where Matthew's genealogy goes back to Abraham and has David feature heavily in it, Luke's genealogy goes back to Adam, and God. He indicates that Jesus is first and foremost the son of God, the new Adam, man as God intended man to be from the start.

This Jesus, this new Adam, this perfect Son, comes to the world and walks amongst its people, showing what a life lived according to God's commandments looks like. The healing it brings, the joy, the life, the change, the transformation that happens wherever he appears. From Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, Jesus is good news, especially for the poor, the marginalised, the down and outs. In Luke's view, He comes to find people where they are at.

Meals feature very largely. Wherever Jesus goes, wherever, later on in Acts, his disciples go, meals are a very prominent feature of his and his disciples' activity. The words for "home" and "house" appear more frequently in Luke than in any of the other gospels, and with good reason. Beginning his gospel in the Temple in Jerusalem, Luke finishes his gospel in a home. Beginning the book of Acts in the temple, he finishes it again at home, with Paul, in Rome.

In Luke's eyes, Jesus, the new Adam, has come to show humanity a new way, a different way of doing religion, of journeying with God. From the temple to the home, Jesus moves on a level with the rest of humanity. He is on the road with them, sharing their life, offering guidance, breaking bread, providing them with healing and peace.

He represents a God that is no longer limited to the temple or the synagogue, but meets people as they journey through life – on the road, in their homes, at their tables. He promotes a faith and a worship practice that is no longer restricted by the boundaries of sacred places and ritual. In Luke, God's presence moves out of the temple and a sacred space only accessible to priests, via an upper room where a group of close friends receive the Holy Spirit, to a prison cell where an ordinary Jewish man, who isn't even an eyewitness, gets together with whoever wants to hear and be part of this new movement.

The painting at the front of the order of service and on screen very cleverly brings this Lukan perspective into focus. The painter, named Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, lived in Spain at the end of the sixteenth century in the period immediately after the reformation, and was an important painter at the court of King Philip IV. It shows an understanding of the gospel and the Emmaus story that is uncanny and a bit unsettling.

What we see here is not, as in so many other paintings, Jesus on the road, deep in conversation, or the two inviting Jesus in at the end of the journey, or even the moment where they recognise Jesus as he breaks the bread. No, centre stage is a servant girl – a mulatto, a dark skinned maid who, at the time when Velazques

was painting, would have been at the very bottom of the ladder. A nobody. Marginalised, at the service of others, moving around the house unseen, unheard, unnoticed.

There are two versions of this painting. One has only the servant girl. Holding on to a wine jug, she listens to something that's happening behind her, with her eyes studiously fixed on the table surface, her whole body is tense, intent, and she has a look of astonishment on her face. Looking at her, we can feel her heart skipping a beat, her ears wide open, gasping under her breath.

The other painting shows what it is that has such an effect on this girl. In the upper left hand corner we see Jesus, with his two companions at the table, in deep conversation. The bread has not been broken yet, there is nothing on the table and the maid is in the process of taking a jug of wine to the table, she may even still be filling it! (how symbolic!).

Before Jesus' friends, before the "in" group gets it, she does. The guys at the table, after a couple of hours on the road with him, are still totally absorbed in themselves, in their conversation, in their questions, in their learning. In the meantime, this girl, this outsider hears, recognises, understands, and is getting ready, in more ways than one, to serve them the wine and the bread that will finally open their eyes to the resurrected Jesus.

What Velasquez portrays here is concurrent with the themes that underpin the gospel of Luke. Revelation, insight, understanding, comes to the marginalised first, seeking them out where they are, at their home, in a stable, at the kitchen bench to branch out from there to others. With the first coming consistently last, and the last coming consistently first.

There is an important message in that, especially on a Sunday where we celebrate communion.

The place to really meet and understand Jesus is at the table, breaking bread and drinking wine. And that is why, from the very beginnings of the Church, the meal has been such an important feature of our identity as a community. No Church is without the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine, because it is there, in community, that Jesus reveals himself most profoundly.

Velazquez' painting, however, points out that that is not all there is to it. The two at the table with the Lord, with hours of teaching behind them, still can't see. But the servant girl can.

Are we like the two men? Travelling with Jesus, hearing the teaching, but so self-absorbed that we can't really see and understand, even if he is sitting right next to us?

Over the centuries, the Church, we, have time and time again changed this meal and made it into a temple practice. Something that is only open to an initiated few, exclusive, with all sorts of rituals and rules that raise boundaries around it. It would be good for us to remember what Luke tells us and Velazquez so beautifully puts in his painting.

In the beginning was the meal. In the beginning, Jesus took faith from the confines of the temple, onto the streets, and into the homes of ordinary and even less than ordinary people. He welcomed them in and took down the barriers that kept some of humanity out, limiting faith to an in crowd, to proper practice and sacred and hallowed places.

God, according to Luke, is everywhere. On the road, at the table, in the kitchen, in the stable, out in the fields. There are no fences around God's love and God's care, there is only openness. The dream of a new humanity and the humbling awareness that while we conduct our table fellowship with the Lord, behind us, out of our line of vision, someone else, someone outside our frame of reference, may be getting something we are not, as yet, ready to understand.

Amen.

Picture: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/13/La_mulata,_by_Diego_Velázquez.jpg

Article: <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20140428JJ.shtml>