

## ***Journeying with John: Series 3***

These studies are based on a selection of readings from the Gospel according to John.

1. John 13:1-11, 31-35 – Washing the Disciples' Feet
2. John 14 – Looking to the Future
3. John 15:1-17 – The True Vine
4. John 17:1-26 – Jesus' Prayer for Unity

Unlike the other gospels, John's gospel includes relatively long passages which begin with incidents and to which the author has added either speeches or dialogues. The readings above take up just selected portions, but the commentary discusses each in its broader context.

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from John, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

### **Making these studies work for you and your group.**

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start:

### ***Meet John!***

Like the other gospels, John's gospel contains no information about the author except to say that the authority behind it is someone called "the beloved disciple", whom many identify with the disciple, John. This gospel stands at the beginning of a time when authors felt the need to claim special authority for their gospels, which differed considerably from the first three. We have, for instance, gospels claiming inside information through Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and even Judas Iscariot. Such claims are without foundation. In the case of the fourth gospel it is likely that the author wants to reassure the readers that his gospel has a link with the first disciples. Perhaps his congregations owe their origin to John and we are meant to guess that he is "the disciple whom Jesus loved". He certainly functions symbolically as a kind of companion and rival to Peter, nearly always outdoing him, so representing the author's claim that his gospel is also in some way superior.

This gospel is certainly different from the first three and contains very freely composed speeches and dialogues which depict Jesus speaking in a different kind of way with different key terms than the way the earlier gospels portray him. It is as though the author is like a modern artist who is intent on portraying the meaning of Jesus through key concepts and ideas, rather than reproducing an historical account. Jesus is the Word, the bread, the light, the life, the vine. This is the language of faith. At one level it is creative embellishment and fictional. At another level it profoundly captures the message and importance of who Jesus was and in this way portrays what the other gospels were less able to do.

With the other gospels it is fairly easy to see how Matthew and Luke have copied and reworked Mark. With John most specialists these days would say that the author is basically familiar at least with Mark, but does not have a copy of Mark in front of him. We sometimes find echoes of Mark in quite incidental details, but otherwise the reminiscences are slight. Perhaps he had read Mark aloud many times to his congregations, so that some details stuck in his memory when he set about composing his own very free and creative account.

Historically John also carries some information not found in the other gospels, which does not belong to his elaborations, but to earlier tradition. This includes information about Galilee and Judea, It may also include the information that Jesus' ministry lasted not just one year, as the others have it, but three years, and that Jesus visited Jerusalem during his ministry not just at the end but at least three times in between and that he died on a Friday which was not Passover Day, as the first three indicate, but the day before Passover Day.

This all makes John a fascinating mixture of highly imaginative artistry, including dialogues and speeches which are largely fictional, but also some gems of older tradition. The author has composed a gospel whose focus is not on the details of history and on specific sayings and events, but on the event of Jesus' coming as a whole and what it means now. Its images of light, life, bread, water, speak a universal language which has endeared this gospel to many and made it the basis for communicating the gospel across human culture.

For further information on John as it appears in the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>

*These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Literal translations in appendices and photos are his own.*

## Session One

### John 13:1-11, 31-35 – Washing the Disciples' Feet

This was not a stunt. It was symbolic of an attitude to be embraced, and was designed to confront an attitude to be set aside. The attitude it confronts is that greatness and leadership mean having status and authority and getting other people to serve you. The more power you have, the greater you are. Be a king, sit on a throne, have people bow and scrape before you. Have lots of servants. Have lots of wealth. Paradoxically many of our images of God are drawn from such an attitude. It is sometimes the model for worship.

It has always been difficult to swim against the stream and say that true leadership is about being a caring loving person. It was almost impossible to avoid using the customary language of greatness when speaking of God and Jesus, so that our faith tradition is riddled with its germs. It was not realistic to remove such images. The solution was to subvert them. So, Jesus is crowned – with a crown of thorns. Jesus is enthroned – upon a cross. God is king – a king of love.

After showing the disciples obsessed with the traditional image of leadership of might and power and despite Jesus' telling them that his would be a path of service and suffering, Mark has Jesus declare: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45), which many in effect reverse to read: "The Son of Man came not to serve but to be served and to give his life an example for many".



Here in John 13 the author has his own way of making the point. He has Jesus doing what was usually the task of a household slave: washing guests' feet as they come in from the dusty roads. Of course, Peter objects. Peter objects also in Mark 8:27-33 when Jesus accepts Peter's acclamation that he was the Messiah and goes on to speak of his path of service and suffering. Peter counsels Jesus not to think like that and Jesus responds by telling Peter he is like Satan. He's following popular human values, not God's values.

In John's story Jesus tells Peter that, if he wants to belong, he had better get on board with these subversive values. I once lectured on this passage to a student body of an institution whose principal was present and felt the same when the principal pointed out that that kind of leadership is no longer suitable today. Fortunately, Peter later appears to have got the message and became a shepherd of the sheep (21:15-17).

The passage begins significantly with reference to love: "Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1). Where love is the driving force, values change. It all began because "God so loved the world", as John 3:16 tells us. Believing one is loved and valued by God means we do not need more to make ourselves feel important. We are already important because God loves us. That frees us to see others not as potential admirers, but as people to whom we in turn can show love.

This is the logic of the way the author applies Jesus' deed as a model to what needs to be the way believers relate to one another. Love frees us to love. Set within the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, this message goes beyond Christians just caring for one another. It motivates love for all

peoples, whether believers or not. In that sense it motivates mission and helps us to see mission as the natural outcome of loving people. This is a healthy antidote to models which view mission as recruiting admirers for Jesus, marketing for numbers.

The rest of John 13 reflects the idea that roses have thorns. Judas will betray Jesus. Love is not always safe. It will sometimes provoke its opposite, including hate and betrayal. Love that does not do so is usually inauthentic or something watered down, like trying to be nice to everyone, never raising questions or rocking the boat, keeping the peace and sweeping the need for change under the carpet.

Near the end, in 13:31-35, the chapter to the theme of the opening verses which began by depicting Jesus facing up to his death. There he spoke of his returning to the Father. Here he speaks of his returning to the Father's glory. Typically, the author plays with contrasts. Sometimes he speaks of Jesus being lifted up/exalted, which is clever, because to the eyes of unfaith it means being lifted up onto a cross, but for the eyes of faith means being lifted up to God.

Even more striking is the use of the language of glorification. The cross was the very opposite of glorification: it was humiliation and shame, a body mangled on a cross, usually left to be eaten by birds and dogs jumping up to pull flesh off the legs. This is defiant language. The author knows that what is indeed so horrific and shameful is, for the eyes of faith, the pathway through which Jesus would be raised from the dead and would return to the Father's glory. This was also a model and inspiration for those who might be forced to follow the same course.

Back to glory, back to the power and glory that Peter wanted for him in the first place? Done with love; that was just an episode. That would undo everything which Jesus stood for and when seen like that usually does. Instead, at best we understand Jesus' return and going back into intimacy with the God who loved, and is still loving. Glory was a traditional way of speaking of God's presence. As we shall see in the studies which follow, God continues loving and takes another love initiative by sending the Spirit and equipping the disciples to take this love to the world.

The final words in our passage which we also know as set to music, repeat the theme of mutual love, adding that such loving communities of faith are the best evidence that love actually works (and the worst when they are not).

#### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is your experience of the competing models of God?
3. In what ways can we shape worship to be faithful to the emphases of Jesus today?

## John 14 – Looking to the Future

In the ancient world of Christian beginnings it was quite common for people to compose biographies of significant people which included their final words of wisdom to succeeding generations. Sometimes these final addresses would come out as a separate writing, called a “testament”. Among the compositions which have survived are testaments of Abraham, Moses, Solomon, and also of all twelve Patriarchs. They are fiction, usually written long after a person’s death, but designed to summarise what was important for future generations. One of the earliest is the book of Deuteronomy, composed as Moses’ last words.

Among the gospels we see this featuring in Luke’s gospel where Luke has taken advice to apostles which came earlier in Mark’s gospel and transferred it to the setting of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples (22:24-38). It features most dramatically in the fourth gospel where most recognise that a first attempt in chapter 14 has been supplemented by three further chapters in 15 – 17. In the first speech in John 14 we can find echoes of Jesus’ final public statements in Mark 13, such as the references to the Spirit, but the author has followed his usual free hand in putting together what he believes Jesus would be likely to have said for the benefit of future generations.

In the setting of the gospel story the disciples would surely have been “troubled” (14:1) by what they had been hearing, especially about Judas’ betrayal and then about Peter denying his link with Jesus (13:29-30, 36-38). The focus is, however, also on future generations. Why not be troubled? The answer lies in trusting God and trusting Jesus, especially that in the end they, like him, would be at home with God where there was plenty of room and many dwelling places (14:2).



The author has Jesus refer, in 14:3, to his coming again to bring them home, which echoes the early tradition reflected in Paul, according to which Jesus would come back in his lifetime to take believers up into heaven (1 Thess 4:13-18). John’s Jesus will tweak this old tradition to say that his way of coming to them would be through the Spirit, as he goes on to say in 14:18-21. Before that, however, he uses an exchange with Thomas to have Jesus remind the disciples (and all who would be disciples after them) that he is the way to the Father – the only way: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).

It is an exclusive claim with a negative side, as in most of the dialogues and discourses in John, and so is designed to discredit all others in a way which for many today is simply too exclusive. On the positive side, however, it is the claim that if you want to see who God is, you will see it in Jesus. This is why through the exchange with Philip he adds: if you have seen me you have seen the Father. Faith’s claim is that Jesus provides us the criterion for recognising God. We could add that this means that the eyes of faith will recognise God anywhere where the God of love, the God of Jesus, is

in evidence, even when the name, Jesus, is not known and the word, God not used. Light is light and wears no labels, nor does love.

Interestingly, the author has Jesus acknowledge that not all will believe his connection with God. If they don't, they need at least to believe that Jesus' actions reflect God's being, God's priorities and God's works (14:11). It is these works, the works of love which have priority and John's Jesus makes it clear that they are the agenda also for the disciples and for their successors. Their impact will be much greater because they are to go out into all the world. They did just that, as we know, and we are the beneficiaries.

The promise of guaranteed support for this task includes God's presence through the Spirit, understood as a replacement for Jesus – not in a way that makes Jesus out-of-date, but rather keeps updating his significance. That is precisely what the author claims he has been inspired to do in writing his gospel. When people read the promise of answer to prayer as being some kind of guarantee that all our personal needs and ambitions, let alone greed, will be met, they miss the point.

Love keeps coming back in the discourse because love is so central. Love means action, keeping the command to love. It also means relationship. God's presence, Jesus' presence, the spirit's presence – all really mean the same thing. Jesus' coming was not a once-off event, but the beginning of something ongoing. While in the speech Jesus partly alludes to his resurrection appearance to the disciples – they will soon see him (14:19) – the main focus is his coming again to them as they and their successors embrace the challenge of letting God's works of love reach out through them into our world. Through the Spirit God and Jesus will come to them (14:23).

Summing it up in 14:27, John's Jesus returns to the topic of being troubled. No need! For God's presence through the Spirit gives us the peace we need. John uses the word, *paraclete*, of the Spirit, sometimes translated advocate or comforter. Basically, it means helper, in a court room: your defence lawyer. Mark had spoken of the Spirit as helping believers when put on trial (13:11). For John, the Spirit is everything from helper to encourager, to comforter. First and foremost, the Spirit, God's intimate presence, is what enables us to carry on the work of Jesus in the present, as, indeed, it helped him remain faithful to his mission.

#### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. John 14:6 inspired the slogan: "One way, Jesus". What do you think about this?
3. We often hear the opening words of John 14 read at funerals: does it fit there and where else might it fit?

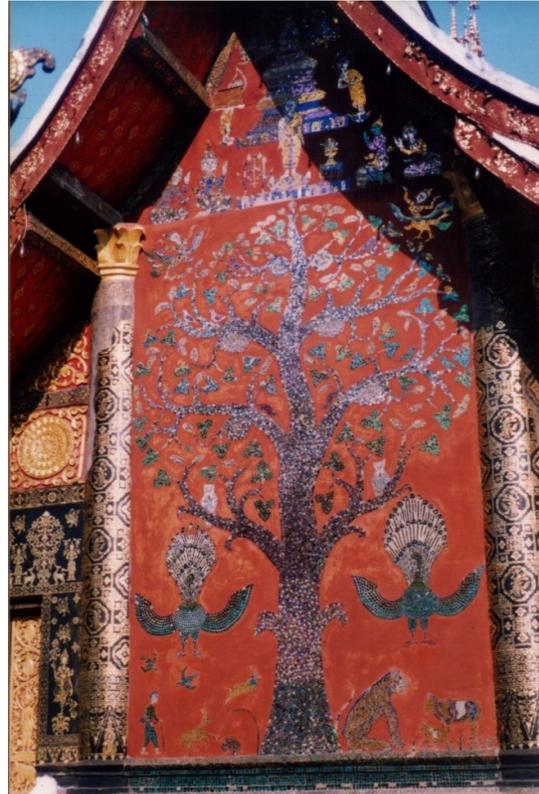
## Session Three

### John 15:1-17 – The True Vine

John 14 ends with the words, “Rise, let us be on our way” (14:31), which many suggest indicates that this was where, at one stage, Jesus’ parting advice to his disciples and their successors ended. If so, then the author must have decided to expand what he had originally written by adding chapters 15-17. They reflect a different concern: unity among future disciples. Hence the repeated instruction already in our passage: “This is my commandment: love one another” (15:12; similarly, 15:17), also the concern in Jesus’ prayer in John 17, “that they may be one”.

First, however, the author has Jesus employ the famous image of the grapevine. He was not the first to do so. The prophets spoke of Israel as being like a vineyard. Jesus told parables about vineyards. Wine was an important element of daily life, usually served mixed with water. People knew about viticulture and the importance of pruning each year. The author has Jesus here speak not of the vineyard as a whole, but of a single grapevine.

Annual pruning was not something negative. Like trimming it to shape, it was about enabling the vine to be strong and produce fruit. In the same way, the image of pruning need not be about punishment here, but about care for the vine. On the other hand, trimming off unfruitful branches does imply judgement. The vine symbolises the believing community and so trimming off unfruitful branches suggests cutting people off. It is reminiscent of the way John the Baptist spoke, when he talked about cutting down unfruitful trees and putting them on the bonfire (Luke 3:9).



Tree of Life – Buddhist Temple, Luang Prabang, Lao Republic

Yet the author does not have Jesus elaborate the negative and perhaps did not intend that we should do so. The focus is very much on staying connected. It is in that sense about spirituality – not in any mystical sense, let alone through the highs and lows of emotional experience. Rather, it is about staying open and aware, and letting the life of God flow into and through us. This means that the author is not just having Jesus give us instructions: you must bear fruit, but is rather helping us to understand that we bear fruit almost automatically if we keep ourselves connected to receiving the love and life for ourselves. This is because God’s love, like sap in our branches, will generate our growth and from that will flow attitudes and behaviours which will make a difference and so spread God’s love into the world.

Whatever you ask you will receive (15:7, 16), is, as it was in the previous chapter, not a promise that all our ambitions, needs and greeds will be rewarded, but rather a promise that we will have the enabling strength and love to bear fruit and offer love to those around us. That, suggests the author,

will glorify God (15:8). This is like saying: what makes life worth living for God is knowing that the gift of love keeps giving. That is the kind of worship God wants, rather than human adulation about greatness and power for their own sake.

The love theme comes back again in what follows in 15:12-17. Connection to the vine means staying in connection with God's love, something Jesus, himself, modelled. That is the source of real joy, just as it is what, according to the author, also brings joy to God. This is a very different set of values from those which want to treat God like a ruler obsessed with his own importance and treat Jesus as God's deputy wanting similar adulation.

Undoing any suggestion of obsession with might and power, the author has Jesus declare that he wants the disciples to consider themselves his friends, not his slaves (15:14). In declaring God's love right to the end, even when despised and executed, Jesus followed the best models of friendship known in the ancient world, which held in high honour those prepared to die for their country. In John 9 Jesus had spoken of his being like a shepherd who was to lay down his life to save the life of his sheep. This is more personal. They are not sheep. They are persons, friends. They are on board with what is at God's heart and what is at Jesus' heart, friends indeed.

All this makes sense of the closing words of the passage. The point of the whole enterprise, beginning with God's initiative, then expressed in Jesus' coming, is to build a community of people who will produce fruit (15:16). At one level this means growing the community by winning others to the cause of Jesus. Primarily and more fundamentally, however, it means bearing the fruit of love – what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), which is the sole purpose and ground for the disciples' mission and ours. Motivated in this way mission will never be reduced to winning recruits and building up numbers.

Our passage ends with the best evidence of love: a loving community. "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another" (15:17). This wisdom is present already back in 13:34-35, which may well have inspired the author to add these chapters, if he didn't perhaps plant them there to help foreshadow that was to come in the first place. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why is telling people they ought to love not enough?
3. What does it take to be the kind of community which people will see as evidence for God and God's love? In your setting?

## John 17:1-26 – Jesus' Prayer for Unity

Jesus' last words of any length in John's Gospel are a prayer for unity. It begins with Jesus' summarising his message and declaring that he has completed his task. That task was to make God known in a new way, to offer the eternal life which comes through God's life. He is ready to return to the presence of God, traditionally described as glory, a way of expressing the wonder of God's being (17:1-5).

He expresses his role in various ways. Making God's name known (17:6) is not about how to label God but about giving expression to who God really is. Similarly passing on the words given to him (17:8), makes him sound like a messenger bringing communication, an important role in the ancient world where telecommunication was not by mail, let alone email, but through authorised representatives, envoys. The author often depicts Jesus as God's envoy, sent from above, but in reality, what Jesus communicates in the fourth gospel is not information, but the offer of a gift, a relationship.



Gethsemane Grotto in Schwäbische-Gmünd, Germany

In verse 9 the author has Jesus turn to his main concern: his disciples. He underlines how they belong together, belong to him and belong to God. He is concerned about what will become of them when he goes. That concern is quite specific: "that they may be one, as we are one" (17:11). We notice that this also has to do with his desire that their lives are full of joy (17:13), even when they face opposition and danger. He is sending them to do what he himself had done (17:18). They are his successors.

He wants them to be sanctified, as he has sanctified himself (17:19). This really means pure. He wants them to be pure, uncontaminated by distractions and sin. It is a way of talking about being holy. Holy means connected to God and fully open to God – in that sense, whole. That means not half-hearted, not part-time followers, but people whose lives are integrated around the one who is life's source and life: God, the God of love. Let the purity of that love touch every part.

As is fitting for final words meant for future generations, the prayer turns its focus in 17:20 to all of us who stand in succession to the first disciples. Again, the concern is unity: "that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:21).

Why so much emphasis on unity in the way the author portrays Jesus' final concerns? The most natural explanation is that in the author's day this had become a problem, a problem of disunity among believers. We do not have to look too far to find evidence of the problem. Already in the gospel, itself, we see some hints. We have the extraordinary statement which follows the mention of the flow of blood and water from Jesus' body when the soldiers speared him on the cross to make sure he was dead: "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true,

and he knows that he tells the truth" (19:35). Obviously, the matter is in dispute, so the author reports that someone saw that Jesus' body was just like any other human body when speared.

Apparently, some people had come to believe that Jesus was not really human, but just appeared to be so. For them he was really the divine Son of God wearing a human body – so they appear to have thought. He only seemed to be human. These concerns reappear in 1 John where a different author from the same setting puts much emphasis on Jesus being really human: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1:1).

We are left guessing what might have happened. The author of the fourth gospel created a drama where Jesus and others are on stage, as it were, as larger than life characters and composed dialogues which show Jesus as all-knowing, in order to keep underlining the main message about Jesus' significance. If you do not appreciate that, then you could easily reach erroneous conclusions. They would include that Jesus was a kind of superman, like a god in human disguise who knew everyone's thoughts and was obviously not really a human being.

By the time of 1 John there had indeed been a split in the community and some had left: "They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us" (2:19). The author calls them the "antichrist". They probably left because they had developed such views. The hints are in 4:2-3 where we read: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup>and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist" (4:2-3). To deny Jesus came in the flesh is to deny his real humanity

The author on 1 John also complains about people not taking earthly human needs seriously and so neglecting the poor (3:17). Probably the two things went together: not taking Jesus' humanity seriously and not taking the humanity of fellow believers seriously. We know of such trends among Christians in the second century.

If this is so, it would make sense of the way the author of the fourth gospel has Jesus pray especially about unity. It would not be the last time that Christians would get so carried away with notions of Jesus as a super-god to be adored in such a way that they lose any connection with Jesus' message of earthy love. Very early on, some Christians saw Jesus primarily as the saviour who had come to rescue them from their bodily existence and take them to heaven. They saw themselves as trying to cope with being trapped in their physical body as in a cage from which they longed to be released. They even developed the idea that not God, but an evil subsidiary had made the physical world.

John's gospel and John's Jesus, while a freely drawn portrait, never loses connection with the reality, at the heart of Jesus' message, namely that the God who made us loves us and wants us to love one another and love and care for the world in which we live.

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What evidence do you see today of people downplaying the humanity of Jesus?
3. In what sense are we as disciples sent as Jesus was sent?