

John 14:1-14
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"Jesus reinvented as the way of the heart"

Introduction

Have you heard the term 'Dorothy Dixer'? It's commonly used in Australian politics to describe a question asked in parliament of a cabinet minister by a member of their own party, to give the minister the opportunity to promote the government's work or criticise the opposition. It was named after North American advice columnist Dorothy Dix (1870-1951) who apparently invented some of the more interesting readers' questions she answered.

Well, those are sort of the kind of questions Thomas and Philip ask Jesus in today's reading. The writers of John's gospel put these Dorothy Dixer-type questions in the mouths of some of the disciples as a means of reinventing the Jesus story.

Historical background

Why would they want to reinvent the story? It's not unusual. We all do it to a certain extent, when we look back with the benefit of hindsight and attempt to make sense of past events in our lives. That's just what the Gospel writer was doing for the community.

A couple of weeks ago I gave you some of the back story to the Gospel when I talked about so-called doubting Thomas. I'll give you a quick refresher:

John's Gospel, otherwise known as The Fourth Gospel, was written by members of Jerusalem's Jewish Christian community, decades after Jesus died. It comprises writings by several authors over six decades.

65 to 70 years has passed and still Jesus has not returned as the hoped-for Messiah. Nebuchadnezzar has overthrown the city and destroyed the temple, and the community is still being persecuted. They have been thrown out of the temple by the traditional Jews who did not agree Jesus was the Messiah. The community is unsettled in the space created by Jesus's absence. Tensions are high between the two communities. Families are divided, friends are at odds with each other. Their future as a community is uncertain. Their world has changed beyond recognition. The people despair.

Rewrite

So, the writers of John's Gospel rewrite Jesus's story to redefine Jesus in light of their despair and uncertainty.

US theologian John Spong suggests the gospel writers dropped the idea of Jesus's promised return to establish the Kingdom of God because it had not happened. The writers did not want their members to lose hope and return to the synagogue, so they reframed Jesus as one whose death opened human life to new meaning. Rather than one who would return and establish the promised kingdom, the writers reframe Jesus as a kind of metaphor for a way of life and transformative love.

They use the questioning disciples to make it appear that Jesus himself explains who he is in relation to the God of the Hebrew Bible.

Let's look at the reading and a few verses immediately prior: Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem where they have eaten their last supper together. The mood is gloomy. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, given them a new commandment to love one another, predicted Peter's denial, foretold Judas's betrayal, and told his friends that he is about to leave them to go somewhere they cannot follow just yet. However, he tells them they know the way to the place he is going. Feel Thomas's panic when he retorts, "we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Indeed! What a sensible question - how can you find your way somewhere if you have no idea where you are meant to be going, if you have no clues to the destination, let alone a map or guide?

Jesus answers Thomas: "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Philip interrupts: okay then show us the Father "and we will be satisfied," (14:8) Jesus's response to Philip is just as bewildering as his reply to Thomas moments earlier: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? (14:9-10a)

No wonder the disciples are confused! The Jesus of John's Gospel speaks of a mystical oneness between Jesus and God in a way that is not easy to comprehend.

The gospel's authors want to reassure the members of the first century Jewish community in Jerusalem that all will be well, but Jesus's words read like a riddle!

US theologian Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus as **'the way'** is a universal metaphor, that to follow Jesus is to live a certain way and that way is like a road or a path to be followed. It is not a set of beliefs. It is love in action.

To be honest, I struggle with this passage, apart from the history. I agree with Spong that the gospel is not to be taken literally, and I understand Borg suggesting that to follow Jesus is a way of life rather than a set of beliefs. It seems to me that that we are to read it in its historical context and listen to what it is saying about a new way of living modelled by Jesus who stands with the oppressed, the marginalised the lonely, the downtrodden.

If we accept Borg's suggestion that Christianity is a way of the heart, that our lives should ideally reflect a desire for the transformation of the world, then that is our calling as a community - to be here for each other in whatever way we can, and to stand like Jesus did with those on the margins of our society and work to transform the world by bringing people from the margins to the centre. Let's face it, if we aren't about transformational love, what is the Christian community about?

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And on this note, I will turn to the way in which Jesus's words "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." This passage has been used by some Christians since the first century to claim Christian superiority and deny the validity of other religions.

Spong puts the passage in context. He suggests the gospel writer was simply saying "stay within the community of Jesus - don't return to what you left behind." It is a pastoral exhortation in a particular historical setting, in an attempt to save the Jewish Christian community in first century Jerusalem.

I think about this now as I consider the people of many faiths in New Zealand. In particular, let us remember the millions of our Muslim sisters and brothers around the world who are currently marking Ramadan, a month of intense prayer, and dawn to dusk fasting to bring them closer to God and remind them of the suffering of those less fortunate.

Let us, the community of St Andrews on The Terrace, also remember those less fortunate both inside and outside our community, and let us aim to be love in action, to be a cloak we wrap around one another, and the lonely, marginalised and oppressed in our wider communities.

Aroha mai, aroha atu. Love towards us, love going out from us.

Amen

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