

## SOLITUDE SHORTS *from* HODDER FAITH

ESSAYS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

*Solitude Shorts* is a series of essays from Hodder & Stoughton, provided free of charge for Christian reflection during the Covid-19 pandemic. Isolation may well be the word of the moment, but perhaps we might rather reframe this time as one set apart for solitude, something Christians have sought throughout the ages. For we are never isolated from God, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves, in the words of St Augustine. As the title suggests, the essays are all brief, taking approximately only five minutes to read. Please distribute them to whomever you feel might gain some encouragement. If you would like to receive these essays directly on publication, please [fill in your details here](#) to be added to our newsletter. The series launches today with the first in a selection of three reflections for Holy Week from Nick Page. This first, for Maundy Thursday, focuses both on the betrayal of Jesus and the symbolism in the Last Supper. It is taken from Nick's book *The Longest Week*.

### The Longest Week: Maundy Thursday

*by*

Nick Page

*'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me'*

Immediately after washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus talks about betrayal. The Evangelist John describes him as 'troubled in spirit'. Jesus dips a piece of bread in a dish of sauce and hands it to the one who will betray him: Judas Iscariot.

It's always slightly worried me, this scene. Because, frankly, how thick do you have to be not to spot the traitor? Especially after Jesus has said: 'It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' Surely the disciples – or some of them at any rate – must have realised something was very wrong. The scene, as it's played out in the synoptics, is slightly less worrying, because, in those scenes, Jesus merely identifies that it's one of the twelve, one of those dipping their bread into the same bowl (Mark 14:20; Matt. 26:23). Or maybe it was never quite as clear as all that. As time went by, there's a sense in which the Gospels focus much more on Judas's betrayal. For example, in the perfume incident in Mark it is merely 'some of those present' who complained (Mark 14:4); in Matthew – written later – it is 'the disciples' who were angry (Matt. 26:8); but by the time we get to John – probably the last of the Gospels to be written – it is Judas Iscariot who is the dissenting voice (John 12:4–6). What's more, John gives us the information that Judas was a thief who used to steal from the common purse. So, was John simply correcting the account? Or being wise after the event?

And when did Judas leave? In Mark, the passage about betrayal occurs before the meal. In Luke, the betrayer's hand is still 'on the table' after the bread and wine have been served (Luke 22:21). John doesn't include the meal, but he does echo Luke's passage about Peter denying Jesus and, by that time, Judas has left. If John and Luke were following the same kind of traditions about the passage of events, we might expect Judas to have shared in the bread and wine, and then slipped out. Whatever the case, John does give us a plausible reason for how Judas slipped from the room without detection. When Jesus says to him, 'What you are about to do, do quickly' (John 13:27), the disciples think he is going to buy provisions for the festival of Passover the next day, or make a donation to the poor. (No one was to appear at the festivals without money for alms.) As Judas slipped out into the night, the other disciples thought he was going to give money away. How wrong can you be?

*'Do this in remembrance of me'*

The earliest account of this meal comes not, in fact, from the Gospels, but from elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth in AD 54/55, wrote this:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:23–26).

This, then, was the tradition that was circulated among the early church. The church took this symbolic action and turned it into what is known as the Eucharist (from the Greek word meaning 'to thank'). It became the heart of their shared meals, a symbolic action to recall the death of Jesus.

Jesus uses two symbols for this meal that were near universal in the Græco—Roman world. Bread was ubiquitous. The sound of the millstones and the smell of baking filled the streets of every city, town and village. Equally, vineyards were everywhere on the hillsides; even in the city we may assume that vines were grown, forming roofs along some of the narrower streets. In that sense, there is nothing exotic about this feast: it's simply the most basic elements of Mediterranean food. And it's delivered in the most basic way. Some scholars have seen in the breaking of the bread a symbolic picture of violent death, but breaking bread wasn't unusual – it was the ordinary way of starting the meal. This was a meal that could be joined by virtually everybody in the Græco—Roman world. Attempts to make it *exotic* miss this point entirely. Its *ordinariness* was the point. There were no special objects there, no 'holy grail' to hold the wine. It was just a cup. It was just bread and wine, the everyday elements of Palestinian eating and drinking. Indeed, this very ordinariness fits with one of the most distinctive aspects of Jesus' ministry: his love of shared meals. Wherever he went, Jesus had meals with people, meals which satisfied not only their physical hunger and thirst, but also their spiritual hunger and thirst. The outsiders and the marginalised and the impure were welcomed around the table. This meal is the culmination of those traditions. And, indeed, this meal is to be shared with others; it's to be passed on, enjoyed and celebrated from day to day, week to week, generation to generation.

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