

John Docherty, May 14, 2017
Let not your hearts be troubled

John opens the passage we read from chapter 14 with the words “Do not let your hearts be troubled”. It's an opening line for a passage that hints at what awaits us after death; that goes on to encourage the disciples' belief in God and in Jesus; and that gives a glimpse into Jesus' identity with the Father.

As an opening line to an entire chapter, it might be reasonable to think that this passage stands alone to some extent. By that I mean it might seem like the passage is self-contained, and not particularly related to any other passage in the Gospel – it may just be a further piece of information that can be added to the other bits and pieces we have of Jesus' teachings.

But I think we need to keep in mind that when these documents were written in the original Greek, they weren't written with chapter and verse enumerated. In fact, they weren't even written with punctuation as we know it today. There was a body of writing, and there was some expectation that the readers would know when a thought started and ended without the need of additional hints, such as commas, periods, quotation marks, paragraph indents, chapter titles.

That lack of punctuation has led occasionally to some dispute about what exactly was being said in some passages. This passage doesn't entirely escape that kind of discussion among the commentators I consulted, but my own interest lies in why the chapter division is placed where it is. It seems important to me to understand the context of these words if we're to understand how they apply to us today.

The encouragement, for example, to “not let your hearts be troubled” is sometimes pointed to as an overarching principle for life : i.e. we should trust God in all things, and worry, in that context, is a sign of a lack of faith, or perhaps even sinful in some way.

I do adhere to the position that we should trust God in all things; that we should understand that God is somehow with us in all circumstances, and that we should accept that we never have the luxury of peeking at the final chapter of the story we inhabit. We don't usually know why things happen as they do, nor do we know how events will ultimately play out. So, yes, we should trust that God has not abandoned us to chaos and random menace.

But this verse is never, as far as I can tell, translated as “Do not worry” (except in

the “Contemporary English version”, and the “Good News translation”). And while there are other passages elsewhere where Jesus takes a fairly 'zen' approach to life (God takes care of the sparrows and the flowers of the field ...), I'm not so sure that is quite the message he's trying to convey here.

To get some context, I think we need to back up a little and read what has just transpired between Jesus and the twelve in the preceding chapter.

Let's start reading at chapter 13, v. 5, skipping to what I think are the relevant verses.

John 13

5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ... 9 Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' 10 Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'...

15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." ...

21 After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' 22 The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. ...

So when he had dipped [a] piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. 27 After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' ...

33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

36 Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.' 37 Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for

you.’ 38 Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.’

The next verse is chapter 14, v. 1 : “Let not your hearts be troubled”.

I think it's reasonable to assume that this verse is directed specifically at those who are sitting with him at table, and that it's meant to apply directly to what he's just told them.

In part, what he's just told them is that “Not all of you are clean.”

He's just told them that to fulfil scripture, “The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.”

He's just told them, very explicitly ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’

He's just given them a new commandment to love one another, possibly implying that that may not presently be the case, or at least, that they may be entering a phase when that love will be sorely tested.

He's then just capped it all off by telling Peter that “before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

What are they to make of all this?

It may seem to them that they're all under a cloud of suspicion and on the receiving end of a harsh piece of judgment on Jesus' part.

Are they individually wondering about their own misgivings or doubts?

Are they weighing their own attitudes about each other against this new commandment to be loving?

Are they breathing a sigh of relief that Peter is the one who's just been identified as the one who will deny Jesus; and then wondering : “if *Peter* is capable of denying Jesus ... ?”

Jesus himself is in a state of possibly high agitation – we're told in verse 21 that, of all people, *he* was troubled in spirit. And while John doesn't tell us anything of the

details of his agony in Gethsemane, I think it's safe to assume that he's already anticipating what's to come.

His instruction to Judas, for example, to 'Do quickly what you are going to do', I think can be fairly paraphrased as "Go on, get it over with! *Just do it!*"

His encouragement to the disciples, then, to not let their hearts be troubled, can perhaps be seen as a bit of a projection of his own tortured emotions. It certainly seems, from John's perspective, that this evening spent with the twelve – and, significantly, ultimately spent with the “eleven” - is a key moment in Jesus' ministry. Of 21 chapters in John's Gospel, fully 5 of them are taken up with the details of his interactions and words during this meal with his closest followers.

And these words are mainly words of comfort. It makes me wonder if Jesus isn't trying to reassure them that they're alright and that they'll be alright; that whatever happens they can trust that he is somehow right there with them, and that they have his confidence :

“Do not let your hearts be troubled”

“Where I am, there you may be also”

“I am the way and the truth and the life”

“Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do”

“I will not leave you desolate”

“My peace I leave with you”

“Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful”

“These things have I spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full”

“These things have I spoken to you, that you should not be caused to stumble”

“You therefore now have sorrow, but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one will take away from you”

“Ask and you shall receive, and your joy shall be made full”

“No longer do I call you servants, ... but I have called you friends”

I've always thought that that last comment is maybe the most comforting of all. I've heard some react negatively to this idea of treating Jesus as “my pal” because it sort of trivializes the nature of this idea of friendship. God is not your pal; God is much more important than that.

And, at that level, I think I share a discomfort with the superficial feeling it may represent.

But I don't have any discomfort with the idea of relating to Jesus, or to God, as “friend”. At least not if one has what I consider an appropriate appreciation of the nature of friendship.

Obviously, human friendship involves a degree of equality that isn't the case when we're talking about God, but there are other aspects of friendship that *do* apply.

A friendship is a voluntary relationship, for example. You can't force friendship – it either happens, or it doesn't, and you either open yourself up to the possibility of friendship or you don't. When I was director of the House of Friendship, I took the name very seriously and sought to develop programmes that would allow refugees and asylum seekers to develop those kinds of relationships very naturally through shared experiences, shared memories, shared opportunities for engaging with each other. Much as we do here at MFM.

A friendship is a relationship of trust as well, for example. You may have many acquaintances that are a part of your life, but you don't willingly make yourself vulnerable to someone who hasn't gained your trust over time. With a true friend, you willingly open yourself up and engage in authentic dialogue because you trust that you will be understood, respected, and, at times, challenged by an honest response from someone who cares as deeply for you as you do for them. Much as we try to do here at MFM.

A friendship is also a relationship of reciprocity, for example. In a solid friendship, you expect to give to the relationship, but you also expect to receive. When your friends are in need, you expect to be called upon to help. When you yourself are in need, you expect to be able to call on others to help. Much as we try to do here at MFM.

A friendship is also a relationship of mutual respect, for example. As much as friendships may involve natural affinities of thought, interest and conviction, they also involve a capacity to respect the fact that we are not always of one mind, even when dealing with matters of some importance. Friends may debate issues, but they don't force agreement on issues. Friends leave room for independent thought. Much as we try to do here at MFM.

I've always been impressed by the fact that Quakers call themselves the "Society of Friends". It's a little humbler than Mennonites, who seem to prefer the title "Priesthood of believers" ...

So ... here's a word of encouragement of my own :

As we gather after church today to have another run at defining who we are, and how we would like to be seen, can we approach the question as a community of friends, each with our own flawed perspective on what is right and each with a willingness to accept that maybe we have something to learn from each other, rather than as an enclave of priests, each with our own divine word on what is right, and each with a willingness to insist that the others have something to learn from us?

And if I can paraphrase Jesus' words in the gospel of John : Let not your hearts be troubled, regardless of how things may appear. You're among friends.