Narrator (00:01):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd, interviews Professor Andrew McGowan, Dean and president of Berkeley Divinity School and McFadden, professor of Anglican Studies and Pastoral Theology at Yale Divinity School, Dean McGowan shares how early Christians understood baptism differently than Christians today,

McGowan (00:29):

Not so much conversion from one faith to another as conversion to a new level of seriousness about seeking God.

Narrator (00:37):

He argues that the well-known biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is not about sacrifice, but about trust.

McGowan (00:42):

What Abraham is being asked to trust is that God will fulfill his promise to give him descendants, even though he's apparently asking him to give up the thing that looked like it was the way God was fulfilling that promise.

Narrator (00:53):

And Dean McGowan reflects on over a decade of leading Berkeley Divinity School at Yale

McGowan (00:58):

Privilege of working with these very, very capable students from different backgrounds. And to hear their insights and to be able to offer something to them is something that I'm profoundly grateful for and always will be.

Judd (01:12):

It's been seven years since you came onto the podcast. When we first started in the first season, you talked about the origins of Christmas and every single Christmas, I go back to that podcast and I listen to it and I just find myself remembering how much wisdom you gave us. So thank you for coming back on.

McGowan (01:31):

You're very kind, Emily. It's a pleasure.

Judd (01:34):

And this time I want to talk to you about something not so festive, but just as interesting. Much of your scholarship has focused on the life of early Christians with this unique focus on ancient food and meals. On your social media profile. You call yourself a historian of ritual meals and bread. So as such, I would like to hear your insights on the Last Supper. In the last supper, we all know the story. Jesus tells the apostles, this is my body. He's referring to the bread. This is my blood. He's referring to the wine and this ritual, you've written about this, it's been misunderstood or it was misunderstood as cannibalism by the early Romans. When the Christians were doing these types of rituals for the apostles at the moment of the last Supper, what were they thinking do you think when Jesus said, take this bread, it's my body.

Take this wine, it's my blood. Was there something in the Hebrew Bible where they would've had some type of precedent for what Jesus was saying?

McGowan (02:49):

There are different things in the Hebrew Bible that he might be alluding to, but not one single thing. So one thing is that of course the three synoptic gospels identified this as a Passover meal. So when he takes bread, we're probably assuming then this is the unleavened bread of the Passover Seder. And when he says this is we're perhaps being encouraged to think that he's not just identifying bread and body, but also identifying the whole Passover experience with something that he's about to do. So by the time the gospels are written down, the Christians who are thinking about these things are remembering a whole range of stories. So the Passover and its interpretation is part of what they're thinking. And of course the Passover also involves the slaughter and consumption of a lamb. So when he says, this is my body, I don't think it's just like I am somehow weirdly engaging you in an act of sacramental cannibalism, but rather I'm presenting myself to you as a sacrificial victim and in particular, presenting myself to you as the Lamb of the Passover.

(03:56):

The other thing I'd add about those words is that there are slightly different versions in the four versions of the story we have. In fact, the fourth version isn't in the fourth gospel in John, it's in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which is probably older than the three Gospels. And Matthews and Mark's words are basically exactly what you quoted. This is my body, this is my blood. But in Paul's version, which is older we think, and in Luke's gospel's version, he says, this is my body. But then he says, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is a little bit different from saying that the cup is blood. It's saying that the cup represents a covenant. And so that also I think we can connect with the Passover story because when the Israelites are led out of Egypt, according to the Exodus story, they go with Moses and they create a new covenant with God at Sinai and they have sacrificial victims and they feast on a great meal together, which is not the pass of a meal, but the meal of this new Sinai covenant with which we of course associate the 10 Commandments.

(04:59):

So in the Luke and Paul version, there's also this hint then not so much of drinking blood, but of taking part in a covenant in which a sacrificial victim will be offered. And of course the sacrificial victim is Jesus himself.

Judd (05:14):

What was the evolution of the Last Supper? Why was that so important as a ritual to be practiced and were they always doing it with bread and wine?

McGowan (05:25):

Well, I think that as far as we can tell, Christians were gathering and sharing bread and probably wine most of the time from as earlier point as we have access to. But they weren't necessarily thinking about this purely as a repetition of the Last Supper. So there are other stories where Jesus shares bread and at least bread with people in the New Testament, the famous stories of the miraculous multiplication of loaves, or in a story that many Christians read during the Easter season, a story where at Emmaus he's with a couple of friends who don't recognize him and he goes and eats with them and he takes the bread and breaks it and blesses it and gives it to them, which by the way, that little sequence of take, bless, break and give is found not only in the Last Supper stories, but also in those miraculous feeding stories. It's always there that same sort of echo. So I think that some of the Christians, when they're

gathering, they understand they're eating with Jesus the way people ate in a Emmaus or understand they're eating with Jesus the way people once did on a Galilee and hillside. The last Supper, of course, is part of that mix, no question. Over time they became more ritualized and shifted towards being the familiar Eucharist. But initially the Christian meal was a meal celebrated with Jesus, understood to be present.

Judd (06:43):

Interesting. You have authored a book, ancient Christian Worship, where you explore the roots of Christian rituals like the Eucharist, which we just talked about, baptism preaching. Can you talk about the roots of baptism in particular?

McGowan (07:00):

Yes. Baptism is of course often held up by Christians as being of a kind of comparable importance to Eucharist with a very different significance of course. But baptism and Eucharist are really like the two ritual actions that constitute Christian identity in almost every tradition. The origins of baptism are a bit different though. In fact, curiously enough, baptism is probably older than Jesus on participation in baptism. That is to say many listeners will remember the stories about John the Baptist, who according to Luke's gospel is a cousin of Jesus and who according to all the gospels, has a ministry of baptism and preaching of repentance, which is chronologically prior to Jesus' appearance on the scene. And it seems that again from the gospels that quite a number of Jesus' earliest followers had been people who'd been followers of John and that they'd gone out and participated in his baptismal ritual.

(07:56):

So the second version of the question is where does baptism comes from? Well, it comes from John's baptism, but that's just really then to recast the question. So why does this character John start baptizing people and what does that even mean? John seems to have gone out into the wilderness and most famously to be active in the Jordan River, inviting people to take part in a washing ritual, let's say, or a bathing ritual. And that's something new at the time. Of course, Jews and of course many other religious traditions have had ritual baths or ritual washings

Judd (08:33):

Like in the Jewish tradition, mikvah

McGowan (08:35):

The mikvah. Yeah, that's right. Now the mikvah did exist in John's time, but John almost seems to be taking the symbolism of the mikvah and taking it to another place. So the mikvah, as is still used in Orthodox Judaism today, is a place where people may go to bathe on a repeated basis according to needs. So women will often bathe after their monthly periods, for instance. And a mikvah can also be a place where objects can be immersed in order to ensure their ritual purity and so forth. But John doesn't seem to be saying, I'm just going to set my mikvah up at the Jordan. He seems to be saying something else is going on here, which isn't just the cycles of your life or the fact that you might need to bath before you go to the temple, which was also true. It's as if John is going out to the wilderness and saying something even bigger than the temple is coming and you're going to have to come and wash and express your repentance and get ready for the fact that God is on the way, is the way it reads.

(09:34):

John is interpreted by the gospel writers is picking up the message of the prophet Isaiah, preparing the wilderness away for God. So John washes people almost like a kind of radical version of the mikva to say this is about waiting for God's presence, not just in the temple, but out here in the wilderness where God is going to appear. And it wasn't a conversion ritual in the sense of people were becoming adherence of John rather than of being Jewish. They were all Jewish. But John's baptism was like a way of saying change your life. So if we call conversion changing your life, then okay, it's a conversion ritual. The Christians seem to have picked this up and continued it. Many of them had experienced John's own baptism, and it looks as if the best explanation we have is simply that the Christians continue to use John's idea of a one-time washing as a means of preparing oneself for a different kind of relationship with God. And in time that came to be understood as what we might think of as a ritual of Christian conversion, but that's probably not how it seemed in the earliest centuries. Not so much conversion from one faith to another as conversion to a new level of seriousness about seeking

Judd (10:52):

God. That's so interesting. I'm just picking up on what you said about how people would, when they went to the temple, do the ritual washing and you said, John was saying there's something bigger than the temple coming. So that's really fascinating. What about the roots of preaching?

McGowan (11:13):

I'm just writing something about this for my Yale colleague, Carolyn Sharp, who's editing a new book on homiletics, the Oxford Handbook of Homiletics. So this is a free advertisement for that book, which we hope to see next year. And I've been writing a chapter for her on the murky question of what preaching looked like from the earliest times through to about the third century. In the third century, we have a lot of sermons that people preserved and wrote down from people, for instance, like the Great Alexandria and theologian origin, and then after him, people who are perhaps even better known to hear us like Augustine Hippo and John Chris and so forth who were very famous preachers. But in the first couple of hundred years, we have much sketchier ideas about what preaching really looked like. And one of the things I'm suggesting in this chapter is that there was quite a bit of preaching, which we may not think of as that, but quite a bit of conversational discourse in the earliest Christian gatherings.

(12:13):

So we have a number of cases where this is described where in fact Paul does so in the first letter to the Corinthians where he says, when you come together, one of you has a prayer, one of you has a Psalm, one of you has a prophecy and so forth. And it's as if Psalm early preaching was a bit more like what might people think of as a Bible study or a cell group conversation where different people contribute. However, it's also true that from the earliest times we have records of Paul, again unsurprisingly holding forth a great length. There's a famous example of the sermon that went too long in the act of the apostles where Paul is teaching a bunch of people at Troas and there's someone sleeping in the window who falls out and dies, and Paul has to raise him back to life and then goes on with the sermon.

(12:59):

So Paul didn't kind of really get the memo about the fact that if someone's going to sleep during your sermon is probably the time to stop. But that early preaching, as far as I can tell, wasn't taking place in that community meal that we call the Eucharist. It was more in separate sessions that we might think of depending on what we're used to in modern times as catechesis or Christian education. And it really took a couple of hundred years for the expectation of a kind of long discursive analysis of scripture to connect itself to the Eucharistic celebration on a regular basis. We do know that other preaching was going on, but it was often in a different kind of mode of instruction.

Judd (13:41):

It's interesting the contrast between the ancient Christian worship and rituals compared to the modern Christian worship rituals practices. Is there something that was lost over the centuries that we should be reclaiming as Christians when it comes to rituals and practices?

McGowan (14:02):

Yes, it's a good question. I think there are going to be multiple answers to that. And I have found myself that there are people who've read my books who've felt inspired to try and repeat or to reclaim some of the things that I'm talking about, like have a real meal instead of the token sort of amounts of bread and wine that Eucharistic celebration usually involves and so forth. And I'm interested and respectful in those things. But as you know, I'm an Anglican and we do things in a particular way, which is quite traditional and quite ordered, and I'm perfectly happy doing things that way, by the way. So I think first thing I'd say is that things have changed, and it's not always necessary to hanker after the past simply because it's the past. However, I do think your question has force and should cause us to reflect.

(14:53):

I mean, because you put it quite carefully. Have we lost anything? That's a different question from saying, have things changed? One thing I sometimes talk to my students about is as having lost is a sense of how the connection between Eucharist and the meal also connects us to the ways in which people eat or don't eat in their wider lives. So when in the early centuries we have evidence about people bringing food and drink to the Christian assembly, and then some of it is shared in the Eucharist and other parts are given away, other parts are given away to those who have less or preserved. So it becomes like a food pantry for want of a better word. And I'm inclined to say that one of the things we've lost is the connection between Eucharistic celebration and the other ways in which food plays a part in the life of our communities.

(15:42):

And I think that I would like to see us work harder to connect both with questions of hunger and wealth and poverty, and also with questions of the environment and sustainability that are actually always on the table whenever we eat a meal together. And I think we're therefore on the table when the first Christians gathered and shared meals, but which are less obvious when the things that we eat and drink in Eucharistic celebration don't really look very much like what we otherwise think of as food and drink. But there may be other ways to restore that connection. Can we, for instance, encourage people to think that even if they're bread and wine at Eucharist, don't look much like bread and wine from other days, that they might think about the gifts that they bring to church, not simply about supporting the church, but about thinking of support of the community and about hunger in the community as something which is always, always being evoked by the question of eating with Jesus who lived in an environment himself where it's quite clear that many people experienced hunger from day to day.

Judd (16:43):

You are currently exploring in your research how early Christians used and created notions of sacrifice. And I read this article that you wrote about the famous story of Abraham and Isaac in the Hebrew Bible, and you actually argue that this story is not about sacrifice, even though it's God instructing Abraham to sacrifice his son. So what is the story about that?

McGowan (17:09):

I think it's about trust and about faith. And of course there'll still be people who are cleaning up the coffee they spill when they heard you say it's not about sacrifice. How can he possibly believe that? Of course, sacrifice is a significant part of that story, but of course Isaac doesn't get sacrificed, which is one of the reasons that I say that and people sometimes forget that. I think that we understand the story if we ask whatever it is, what would the hardest thing be that we were asked by God to do, and is it conceivable that we would offer it? And of course we might say, oh, yeah, but that's sacrifice isn't it is in the modern sense of the word. But in the ancient world, sacrifice doesn't necessarily mean that sort of altruistic sort of self abnegation that it's come to mean for us.

(17:54):

In the ancient world, sacrifices mean typically animal or vegetable offerings brought to a temple or put on an altar. And they're not necessarily altruistic in the sense that if you bring a sheep, if your Passover festival or if you bring wheat to offer the priests as part of their rations, these are what are referred to in the book Leviticus as sacrifices, but they cost me something. You could say that, but they're not, not what people mean in the modern world. When we say sacrifices where it seems to be all about the offering of our very selves. Now that's theologically very profound of course to think about the idea of the offering of self. And when Christians think about sacrifice, they will often think about the self offering of Jesus. Of course. So it's not that the Isaac Abraham story isn't relevant, the danger of that story is that it may make us think that that's what sacrifice meant in the ancient world, but it's a story that makes use of the notion of sacrifice to talk about something which is I think a difference, something about relationships, something about our existence for God, something about trust, something about dependence.

Judd (19:07):

So meaning when you say something about trust, meaning that Abraham, it was his trust in God and his faith that carries the story basically.

McGowan (19:22):

Absolutely. Because of course we think and we're immediately drawn to thinking that the idea that he could kill his son is just so horrifying. And of course it is. There's no point in pretending otherwise. But in the story, the real point is that there's been this whole saga in which Abraham has been unable to have an heir of his own with Sarah, and they've taken all these other sidetracks to try and make sure that Abraham can have descendants. So Ishmael has come along through Hagar and so forth, and then finally God gives Abraham and Sarah this child. And what Abraham is being asked to trust isn't that God won't make him kill Isaac. I mean, even though that's inevitably where our modern imagination goes, what Abraham is being asked to trust is that God will fulfill his promise to give him descendants, even though he's apparently asking him to give up the thing that looked like it was the way God was fulfilling that promise. So it's really about the divine promise of descent and of Abraham's heritage. And so of course, we are going to be distracted, and maybe that's even not the right word, but we need to at least contextualize that story to think about what's really going on in the narrative rather than just how on earth is it possible that God could tell someone to kill her own son. There are of course, other stories in the Hebrew Bible in which human take place, but this isn't one of them.

Judd (20:51):

So my final question for you, you recently announced your intention to step down as dean of Berkeley Divinity School in June, 2026. You've served three terms reflecting on those 12 years as dean. What is the number one highlight?

McGowan (21:12):

Oh, see, that's so hard. How long do we have? But you made me choose one so it can't take too long. Maybe it's the things that are recent are the ones that come to mind quickly. So I'm going to cheat and just use two and a half. We finished just a year ago renovating the Berkeley Center, which is the sort of home for the Berkeley Divinity School program with our chapel and with our program areas. And that was a big, big project that I think for me is a matter of pride because it's going to be a helpful place for community and worship for 50 years into the future. And so that's a wonderful thing to be able to leave behind as a legacy. But really it is all about people. Theological education always has to be about people, and I'm so grateful for the students that I've met and who've taught me things, and hopefully I've taught them some.

(22:01):

I've just finished, as it were, a class that I teach every couple of years on Guess what, sacrifice. And I've just been so pleased to read very many interesting papers, some of which I have to tell the students that they should keep working on because they could even publish this. And they tend not to be. The Berkeley students do that course. So some of them are, but more of them are other white ER students doing their MA in whatever kind of specialized area. And the privilege of working with these very, very capable students from different backgrounds and to hear their insights and to be able to offer something to them is something that I'm profoundly grateful for and always will be.

Judd (22:36):

Well, I think I can speak on behalf of everyone that Berkeley Divinity School and Yale Divinity School are definitely going to miss you. But I'm happy we're able to fit in one last podcast episode, but maybe you'll come back as a professor emeritus. We can have you back on the podcast. But thank you so much, Dean McGowan.

McGowan (22:55):

Thank you, Emily.

Narrator (22:58):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.