

Do you want to leave too?

13th after Trinity 08.00 & 10.30 25th Aug 24
H.C. & P.C. St James Church Alderholt
Readings: Ephesians 6:10 – 20
 John 6:56 – 69

Sermon:

Today's gospel passage, from John chapter 6, is the last in a four-part series on the bread of heaven. The series is full of statements from Jesus that were difficult for his followers to understand; and, if read in isolation, they have the potential to upset or offend each of us.

Today we hear Jesus telling the crowd, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them" (vs 56). Jewish scripture clearly forbids the drinking of blood, or eating meat that contains blood; so, if those listening took his words literally, it's understandable why they became hostile at that point. "This teaching is difficult," they said. "Who can accept it?"

Jesus then suggests that he is God's own manna, who came down from heaven to give life to the world. He tells the crowd, "Your ancestors ate the manna that God provided in the wilderness and they all died, but if you eat my body, you will live forever."

Still thinking literally, the crowd may have asked, "Is he suggesting that if we eat his human flesh we will never die? We know that doesn't make any sense, so what is he telling us?"

We sometimes ask the same questions today when studying the Bible – what is Scripture telling us? Are we supposed to understand it literally or metaphorically?" Many issues arise that produce tough questions – some of them un-answerable; and Jesus doesn't give his closest disciples simple answers. The truth is that we have been handed down a gospel full of paradox that we will continue to struggle with for the rest of our lives!

Yes – this teaching is difficult, but if the disciples are going to follow Jesus all the way, they are going to have to give up their need to understand, agree with, or approve of everything he said or did. They're going to have to believe him, even when he says something that offends them. They're going to have to trust him, even when what he does goes against everything they've been taught. You can almost sense their minds going into shutdown. So, when Jesus sees the crowds deserting him, he asks the twelve if they want to leave too.

Jesus wants his closest followers to know that following him is no easy path. The people in the

crowd have their reasons for turning away. Change is scary. They don't want to give up their desires, their comforts, their security. They want to follow Jesus on their own terms, without changing their priorities, without being uncomfortable. They want to be in control of their lives. So, the majority who heard Jesus' message thought they understood it, and what they heard didn't appeal to them – so they turned away.

“Do you want to leave too?” Jesus asked his 12 closest disciples. Peter spoke for them saying, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” So, what can we take from Peter's response?

Peter always adhered to Jewish traditional dietary laws and was just as offended as anyone else by what Jesus was saying. Peter never ate forbidden foods, which would include meat with blood still in it, so the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood turned his stomach as badly as it did anyone else's. But where could he go? As confusing as Jesus was, Peter had glimpsed something in him that he couldn't turn away from. In Jesus, he caught a glimpse of God; so, if trusting this insight meant struggling with distasteful things that go with it, then Peter would stay and struggle. He wouldn't turn away from the life he had been led to, even though it was far from what he had expected.

Peter's declaration presents a challenge to many of us today. We live in a time when people often 'shop around' in search of the perfect church for themselves; a church they hope will meet all their needs or satisfy their desires. Some may be tempted to say, "I can't belong to a church that would fund a project like that." Or, "I couldn't be part of a church that welcomes those people.

You may have heard it said, "I've stopped going to church because I couldn't take any more of the hypocrisy, sexism, political bias, old traditional hymns with exclusive language, new, unfamiliar worship songs, preaching that lacks sincerity – I'm sure you could add more to the list.

When the main reason for not belonging to a church is that you can't find a community of faith that agrees with you on everything – from what kind of music we should sing to where we should stand on homosexuality, abortion, or the death penalty, you are in a serious predicament. *Pause*
If you are looking for your perfect church, where you understand, agree on and approve of everything that goes on there – you are going to be very disappointed – because that perfect church does not exist.

When we become Christians, we get a Bible that:

- Tells us God helped the Hebrew people to annihilate whole tribes of people, right down to the last baby.
- We get a code of living that commands wives to be subject to their husbands, and tells husbands to sacrifice themselves for their wives.
- We get slaves being told they should be content with their lot and always submit to their masters.
- But we also get a church that, through study and prayerful discernment, has made decisions such as the ordination of women, that has received the approval of the vast majority of people.
- We get a commitment to scholarly, faithful Bible study, theology and worship that can on occasion fill us with awe and amazement when it gives us a glimpse into the heart of God – who loves the world so much that he sacrificed his Son for our redemption.
- We get the parable of the prodigal son, the story of Naomi and Ruth – and the twenty-third psalm, that we will sing after Holy Communion.

"Lord, where can we go? You have the words of eternal life". This response from Peter to Jesus is a declaration of faith for an ambiguous and troubled world like ours and for people like us – who don't understand everything about Jesus – who have plenty of unanswered questions but remain faithful to

him and his teaching anyway. I can't speak for you, but I count myself in that category. I don't understand everything about Jesus – I have many unanswered questions, but I'm going to continue following his teaching and try to remain faithful anyway.

Besides Christianity, we know there are many other options for pursuing spiritual enlightenment – book shops are full of them – and some people choose not to pursue a spiritual path at all; so why do we keep coming back to Jesus?

- Maybe, it's because we've heard in his words something that rings true to us in deep ways.
- Maybe, it's because whenever we're in his presence we feel more alive.
- Maybe, it's because when we are part of an imperfect group of people who are striving to follow the teaching of Jesus – we discover mutual support, reassurance, contentment and grace – so that when our time here on earth is ended, we can experience the promise of Jesus Christ – that we will enter into his Father's kingdom of love, joy, peace and eternal rest. May it be so – Amen.