

John 6:56-69

Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20

I always find it fascinating to watch adverts on TV and to see the lengths some companies go to in order to try and make the product they're selling look as attractive as possible, to as wide an audience as possible. So, very mundane products like toothpaste, deodorant and shampoo, come with the guarantee that they'll somehow make you attractive to the opposite sex (I've tried it – it doesn't work!); or then there's the car that guarantees it will give you 'the drive of your life' (presumably they're not familiar with the A27!), there's the energy drink that 'gives you wings', and there's even the talking meerkats who want to flog you cheap insurance on comparethemarket.com. In a world where there's intense competition, a good marketing strategy is as important as ever, however bizarre that might be.

But unlike the marketing gurus of our own day, the *Lord Jesus* certainly didn't in any way try to encase *his* message in attractive terms. Far from it. In fact, so *challenging* was his teaching, that John records that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him". They gave up, because it was all just too difficult for them to accept.

So, what was it about the Lord's teaching here that was so challenging? What exactly was it that Jesus was saying about the walk of discipleship which made it so demanding, such that so many simply fell away at this point?

Well first of all, the Lord says here that if we want to truly be his disciples, then we have to put our whole trust in *him*. The image which Jesus uses here of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, is actually a metaphor for putting our trust in him. When we do so, there is a mutual indwelling – if we abide in him, he abides in us. To the crowds following Jesus, this

image would have seemed rather shocking. And the fact that Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross is in view here, would have caused them to be scandalised even further. Many of the folk listening to the Lord would certainly not have been expecting any of this when they had initially decided to follow him. He was turning out to be a very different Messiah to the one they had been expecting. After all, how could anyone who claimed to come from God end his life this way – nailed to a Cross?

Essentially what Jesus is saying here is that they, and we, need to believe in him as the One the Father has sent as a sacrifice for the sin of the world. We need to allow him to dwell in us through his Holy Spirit. And in doing so, we receive eternal life – not something that's wholly in the future – but life lived in the here and now in fellowship with the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit; it's about us being drawn into the life of God the Trinity. The thing is, we can't experience that eternal life in

and of ourselves, but it's only God's Spirit that can give us life. It's because Jesus was endowed with the Spirit that he could speak the words of God and these words give eternal life to all who believe.

Then secondly, we grasp something here of the *cost* of Christian discipleship. The demands made by Christ on those who wish to follow him really separate the 'men from the boys', as it were. The reaction to what Jesus says here is overwhelmingly *negative*. The people are offended, *not* only by Jesus' image of 'eating his flesh', but also by his earlier claim to be the Living Bread that 'came down from heaven'. He was clearly unwilling to take on the role of the Messiah as a political leader who would feed their bellies and liberate their nation from Roman oppression, as they were expecting. In fact, rather than making his demands any easier, the Lord speaks of the even *greater* offence which lies in the future, when they will witness his crucifixion and exaltation at God's right hand. Jesus had to endure the

humiliation of the Cross, before he could enter his Father's glory. And the same applies to all those who truly want to *follow* Jesus. Because following Jesus is *not* about instant glory - we need to follow him to the Cross, as it were, before we can attain the glory – we have to go through our Good Friday in order to get to our Easter Sunday. And it's only through the gift of God's Holy Spirit that we can really grasp this.

Jesus even challenges the Twelve Apostles to clarify *their* position. After all, if they were to be the ones who would eventually lead the way in being Christ's witnesses to the nations, then they had better be clear about, and be willing to accept, what the Lord was demanding of them, as they continued to follow him. And Peter, in characteristic fashion, speaks for them all, re-affirming their loyalty to Jesus on the grounds that only *he* has the words of eternal life – they have no-one else to turn to. Jesus is the One who uniquely comes from God and reveals God.

And then thirdly, we learn from the Lord's teaching here that *commitment* is key to Christian discipleship. It's always wonderful to offer prayers of thanksgiving in church for couples who have been married for a number of years – whether it be a silver, golden or diamond wedding anniversary, or anything in-between – and to celebrate their loyalty and *commitment* to one another through all the ups-and-downs they've experienced in life. And it's equally delightful to celebrate with those who are just starting out on the journey of commitment as a married couple, as they make their vows in the presence of God – vows which are to be for life, 'till death us do part'. In the same way, we are *all* confronted here with the challenge as to how committed *we* really are to *Jesus* – for this is a commitment which is not just for *life*, but has *eternal* consequences.

Will *we* remain true to Jesus when we find the going difficult, when many turn away from him, and when

we find ourselves part of a small minority (as we are increasingly becoming in this country)? I often feel that perhaps it's only when we begin to experience persecution of some kind in this country, that we will begin to understand something of what the *real* cost of discipleship is. In the midst of this, Jesus is present with us, giving us the help of his Holy Spirit and the assurance of eternal life. Yet the cost is real and he doesn't shield us from it. So, when all is said and done, when the going gets tough, will we also fall away, or will we remain faithful?

Our Old Testament reading from the Book of Joshua, set in the context of the tribes of Israel renewing their covenant with God, again speaks powerfully of the need for *commitment* to the Lord. Here Joshua puts before the people a straight choice – either “revere the Lord, and serve *him* in sincerity and faithfulness”, or go after other gods. It's a straight choice – there's no room for compromise – no ‘halfway-house’ here. So, Joshua himself declares,

“.....as for me and my household, we will serve the *Lord*”, and the people follow suit – “.....we also will serve the *Lord*, for *he* is our God”, they promise. Again, it confronts *us* with a clear challenge. Are *we* really committed to the Lord, serving him, and him alone, in sincerity and faithfulness? Or do we all too easily allow the ‘gods’ of this age, like our money and material possessions and relatively comfortable lifestyle, to take central place in our lives?

In the reading from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that our struggles in life as believers are not simply against the *visible* difficulties we face in life, but rather the *spiritual* forces of evil which lie behind them. In the midst of these, Paul urges us to “stand firm.” And how are we to go about doing so? Well, it's by being “strong *in the Lord* and in the strength of *his* power”, through prayer, through immersing ourselves in the word of God, through persevering in faith, and through walking in the way

of righteousness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now on three of the last four Sunday, we've been dipping into chapter 6 of John's Gospel. You'll remember that the chapter began with the feeding of the 5000-plus folk with just five loaves and two fishes, followed by an account of Jesus walking on the water in the midst of a storm. It then moved into the conversation the Lord has with those following him, in which he unpacks the deeper meaning behind the miraculous event of the feeding of the 5000 – how it's essentially a sign pointing to who he really is – the 'Bread of Life', the 'Living Bread that came down from heaven'. And here, towards the end of the chapter, having heard the Lord's teaching, those following him are faced with the choice – either to turn back, or to continue on the way with Jesus, putting their whole trust in *him*.

So, this morning, as we share in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, we have an opportunity to re-affirm *our* commitment to Christ – not in a half-hearted way, but *wholeheartedly* – seeking to give our lives wholly over to *him*. As Christ offers us his life-giving Body and Blood, may our response be that of the Apostle Peter – “Lord, to whom can we go? *You* have the words of eternal life.” For it's only by putting our whole trust in the Lord Jesus and by walking closely with him in this life, that we will be able to share in the joys of the world to come.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you call us to follow in the narrow way that leads to life, yet there are so many distractions along the way. We ask that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our commitment to you may be strengthened and that we may stand firm in your truth. Amen.