

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: John 6:56-69

Theme: *“You have the words of eternal life”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We who attend services regularly and who believe in Jesus Christ’s saving work which was completed on the cross can forget how difficult it can be for people to believe in him. After all, we readily believe and so we accept what God says through the Bible. We may accept so readily we can forget that for other people, the claims Jesus made are just too fantastic to be true, or too hard to believe.

After many of his followers chose to leave Jesus because they found his words too hard to accept, Jesus asked his twelve apostles, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” In faith and by the Holy Spirit Peter answers on behalf of the twelve, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

We want to hear words pleasing to us

You may have noticed that we want to hear good news for us. We want to hear of things that affirm both us and how we perceive the world around us. We crave the assurance and comfort that our world view is right for us for then we don’t have to make changes in our lives. You don’t have to think too hard of examples that prove this point. No-one wants to hear the bad news that they have a serious illness. Nobody likes hearing that something which they always believed to be true is all of a sudden whipped out from under them. Suddenly they need to shift their way of thinking, and this can be difficult for us as we like things to be familiar and certain.

When Jesus began his earthly ministry, he very quickly gathered large crowds about him. It didn’t take long for many people to hear of the miraculous healings or the words delivered with great wisdom and authority from this man from Galilee. In a world without television or sell-out concerts, it must have been very exciting to see and listen to all the things Jesus was doing and saying. Surely there must have been an air of, “What will he do or say next?”

The gospel reading for today is written in John 6, the chapter that begins with Jesus feeding 5,000 men plus the women and children who had gathered to hear him speak and to be amazed by his latest miraculous offering. Jesus doesn’t disappoint as he feeds all these people with just five loaves and two fish. Jesus follows this miracle up by walking on the water, at night, in the midst of a great storm. Jesus’ actions have gripped the attention of everyone as he then begins to teach them that he is the bread of life.

Instead of putting on yet another show to appease his followers, Jesus teaches them and the words he uses aren’t so easy to swallow. Jesus has told them that he is the bread of life and the bread that he gives is his flesh. Rightly so, the Jews begin to argue among themselves and they ask the obvious question, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Surely it would never seem reasonable that any person would offer their flesh for someone else to eat. But in answer to their question, Jesus almost seems to goad his listeners into taking a position. If people are going to follow Jesus, he doesn’t want ‘fence sitters’. “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matt 12:30). This eating of flesh and drinking of blood is not a nice subject and it made the people uncomfortable, it made them squirm.

Jesus words are hard for us to hear

How would you react if someone offered you their flesh to eat and their blood to drink? Would you think that is reasonable or would you think that’s horrible and weird? Perhaps you might laugh it off as a bit of a joke? You might say, “Well your only one person, your flesh and blood will only feed so many before it runs out”. But Jesus who offers himself for you, indeed for all the people of the world for all of time is the same one who fed the whole crowd with just five loaves and two fish. What’s more his disciples gathered up twelve baskets of leftovers, enough to feed the whole nation, the twelve tribes of Israel, enough to feed all the people of God.

We spoke earlier about how easy it is for us to accept these words of Jesus – after all we believe that the Bible is God’s Word which is given to us so we can know and believe in God and his plan of salvation which was won by Jesus and delivered to us through the Holy Spirit. We accept Jesus’ words, this is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

But imagine if this is the message that was being told to you for the first time? How would you react then? Imagine if we invited in a bunch of new people into our church, people who had *maybe* heard of Jesus but who had no idea of who he is and what he has done for all people. How would they react if we told them all about Jesus and the amazing things he taught us and the extraordinary miracles he performed? Wouldn't they want to know more about him, get to know him, watch for the next exciting event that was to take place? Now imagine they are also told, "And by the way, Jesus forgives you as you *eat his flesh and drink his blood!*"

The question has been asked so many times in our church and indeed was asked of me only yesterday. Where are all the people in our churches? And this question is directed to our own families, it is directed to our neighbours, it is directed towards society in general, it can even be directed towards ourselves as we are not always so ready to attend worship if it doesn't suit us or our schedule. "Where are all the people?"

I suspect the truth can be found with Jesus. Jesus proclaimed the truth about himself and the way in which he gives himself to us in order that he can strengthen us and bring us his forgiveness and eternal fellowship to those who gathered to hear him. The people were happy to hear the good news but so many of them baulked when Jesus spoke about giving them his body and blood. So many of them responded, "This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?" It doesn't matter that this is the way that God is working in the world in order that His people might be strengthened and supported. It doesn't matter that it would be as simple as eating the bread and drinking the wine, believing that it truly is Jesus' body and blood which is freely given so we might have our sins forgiven. For many people it is too hard a saying – so they won't listen to it.

If there is some truth in this, if people are turned off the church because of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, how should we respond? Do we water down the message? After all, when you consider all the things Jesus' did and all the things he said, surely it doesn't matter if we gloss over this one thing. We might describe the Lord's Supper as a meal in which we *remember* what Jesus said and did for us. In this way, we aren't really eating his body and we aren't really drinking his blood – we are just remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross. Well some churches have gone down this path and if holy communion is only a meal of remembrance, it doesn't matter what we use. We could have coke and pizza for surely that is more appealing to young people. We could have church in the pub and use a pie and beer, for surely that is more appealing to those in the pub.

In fact we could gloss over the whole Lord's Supper altogether and just remember all the good things Jesus did. We could use him as the best possible example and as long as we do what Jesus did, we'll be okay. Some churches have done that, but the problem is that people still sin, no matter how hard they try to be like Jesus. We don't need a good example, we need a saviour. As a church, now more than every, we should boldly proclaim Jesus and the means by which he has given himself to the world. Many will turn away but if we neglect the whole truth, we risk a poor diet that threatens our own health and certainly doesn't help others to feed on the living bread of Jesus.

The words Jesus used to give himself to us are hard for us to hear. "Eat my flesh, drink my blood." According to the wisdom of the world, none of it makes sense. But you aren't called to live by your wisdom but by faith which brings you God's wisdom. And God's wisdom says in this way Jesus comes to all those who believe in him so he can dwell inside each and every one of his believers.

"You have the words of eternal life"

Jesus' words may be hard for us to hear but like Peter we must answer, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Jesus feeds you and the whole world and he strengthens you from the inside out. The Holy Spirit gives you faith with which you now put on the whole armour of God so that you are protected body and soul from the devil and all his attempts to turn you away from the path that God has mapped out for you.

Jesus spoke boldly and in a way that caused many to turn from him. Maybe after his death and resurrection some of these turned back to him – we'll never know. Watch and pray for those you know who may have turned away because it is too hard for them. Which ever way people turn, Jesus doesn't want 'fence sitters'. Be strong in the Lord. Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel and renewed the covenant between the people and God and he said, "Choose this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.