

**Sunday 26 August 2018 (13<sup>th</sup> after Trinity)**

**St Andrew's, Cobham, 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.**

**Joshua 24.1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6.10-20; John 6.56-69**

**The Bread of Life and the man on the roof**

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Our gospel reading this morning is actually the culmination of one of the great passages in the Bible – Chapter 6 of John's gospel.

The chapter begins with Jesus performing two astounding miracles: first he feeds the five thousand (6.1-14), and then he escapes the crowds by walking on the water to his disciples in their boat (6.16-23). You would think these two miracles would cement the loyalty of his disciples. But, as we heard this morning, the chapter ends with many disciples angry and bitter, turning their backs on Jesus and walking away from him (6.66). 'This is a hard teaching,' they said. 'Who can accept it?' (6.60).

A hard teaching. Many could not accept it, and walked away from Jesus. Some could accept it, and stayed.

But what exactly was the hard teaching? And more importantly, why could some not accept it, despite having witnessed the power of God at work in Jesus, while others could?

Does the answer help us to understand why some people today can accept Jesus, and some cannot? Does the answer help us to understand our own relationship to Jesus?

This is what I would like to look at this morning.

First, let's have a look at that hard teaching. We need to trace the development of the teaching if we are to get a better understanding of our reading this morning, so I will try and do that in a very brief summary.

So, following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus withdraws to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, but the crowd tracks him down again and engages with him.

Immediately we see signs of trouble ahead.

Jesus accuses them: you haven't followed me because of the miracles I have performed, he says, but because you have eaten and are full (6.26). In other

words, they had missed the point. What they wanted to know from Jesus, really, was how to replicate the miracle, what works to do in order to make God happy, in the hope that He would then solve their problems in this world, such as getting food.

And so Jesus challenges them:

*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (6.27a).*

They still don't get it, and they persist: 'What works must we do to please God,' they ask, in effect (6.28).

And Jesus replies (and this is critical):

*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he sent (6.29).*

Our greatest task in life, the work of God, is to believe in Jesus. Please hold this in mind – we will come back to it.

But the crowd aren't buying it – they demand more proof that following Jesus will keep them fed, just like Moses gave them manna from heaven in the desert.

Jesus, very patiently, tells them: It isn't Moses who provides, it is God, and He gives the true bread from heaven (6.32-33).

Naturally, the people immediately ask Jesus to give them some of this bread of God (6.34).

And now the trouble really starts, because Jesus tells them:

*I am the bread of life (6.35 & 48).*

And then also:

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world (6.51).*

This does not go down well. The crowd know Jesus as the son of Joseph and therefore ask (with some justification) how he can say he came down from heaven. And second – they ask, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' (6.52).

But Jesus keeps pressing deeper and says to them:

*'I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day (Jn 6.53).*

This would have been horrifying to the Jews. In Jewish law, it was forbidden to eat meat from which the blood had not been drained away (e.g. Deut. 15.23; Lev. 17, 14-15). In Jewish thought, the blood stands for life, which belongs to God. And now here is Jesus not only overturning this sacred principle, but also claiming that the life that belongs to God is somehow in Jesus himself, and available to us if we will only drink it.

The teaching culminates with our reading this morning: *whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him... (6.56-58).*

It is at this point that many of Jesus' disciples say, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' (6.60). Many of them turn back and no longer follow him. The Twelve, led by Simon Peter, remain, and of them, one was a betrayer. It is a sad, sad moment. Jesus has sifted his followers and winnowed out those who could accept the truth from those who could not.

And so, there the hard teaching is, in all its starkness and shocking imagery: - if you want to have eternal life – if you want to live with God - then you must eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood.

But what does that mean?

Perhaps I can begin answering that with an old joke.

One day, a man climbs onto his roof to fix a loose tile. It's a big house, two stories. He does a nice job and starts to inch his way back to the ladder, when suddenly he slips, and falls over the edge of the roof. Fortunately, he just manages to grab hold of the guttering before he plummets to the earth. He hangs there, his legs dangling in space, trying not to look down.

He shouts for help but his wife has gone out and no-one can hear him. His arms are taking immense strain.

Finally, he calls out: 'God, if you are up there, please help me!'

To his astonishment, God replies, loud and clear: 'My son, I am indeed up here, and it would be my delight to help you. Just trust me and let go, and I promise you will land on the ground completely unharmed.'

A silence follows as the man looks down at the concrete paving a long way below. Finally he says: 'Is there anyone else up there who can help me?'

Dear friends, there is no-one else up there. There is only one way to land safely in eternity – and you will recall what it is from that critical verse I mentioned earlier – the work of God is to believe in the one he sent, Jesus (6.29).

That doesn't mean just accepting doctrine, like when we affirm our faith. It means much, much more:

- It means to place our complete trust in Jesus; to abandon ourselves completely to him, like little children.
- It means to submit to his authority and to obey him, in every part of our lives, without keeping anything separate from him.
- It means to let go of trying to earn our way into God's favour with virtue and good works;
- It means letting go of fear, pride, ambition, greed, resentment, unforgiveness, envy and worry;
- It means to be in a relationship with him such that all our identity, our strength, our comfort and our values come from that relationship.
- All in all, it means taking him so deeply into our heart and mind and will that it's as if we have ... well, *eaten his flesh and drunk his blood*. When we do that, we remain in him, and he in us (6.56), and in this way, we have eternal life, the true spiritual life of God.

It sounds good, doesn't it? But this complete trust and abandonment come hard, as the man clinging to the roof well knows.

What is it that stops us abandoning ourselves to Jesus?

Jesus said that no-one can come to him unless the Father draws him (6.44) or unless the Father grants it (6.65) – but this doesn't mean that the thing is out of our control. The Holy Spirit draws us, but it is still up to us to accept or reject. The disciples who could not accept the hard teaching had been drawn by God, but had chosen to turn away. If you are sitting here today it is self-evident that you are being drawn by God. But if you are having trouble accepting the hard teaching, it is not God's doing - it is up to you to work out what is keeping you from accepting it.

In my experience, not being able to accept the hard teaching doesn't usually come from intellectual concerns, or from a lack of evidence. After all, the disciples who walked away had witnessed first hand the feeding of the five thousand. Usually what keeps us from accepting the hard teaching – and this

was true in my case – was a clinging to our independence. It's not easy abandoning oneself and submitting to authority, even the authority of God. But we are like people clinging to the edge of the roof. The reality is that there is no-one else up there. In the words of Simon Peter: '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,' (6.68-69).

May God bless us all, as we choose to let go.

Amen.