

## **Sermon for online service 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2021**

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV

We've just had a rather eventful (and exhausting) week when our two oldest children got their A-level and GCSE results. They may not have taken official exams, but they had to do what felt like endless mocks and assessments to compensate. All of that took me right back to those moments in the exam hall where you have to stop worrying about whether you have revised properly and you are allowed to open the paper and begin. What you see then is all those challenging questions that you have to think through and answer for yourself. You have to decide how to respond.

Today's reading from John also seems to be all about challenging questions, and how we decide to respond to them. It comes in part of a sequence in John where enthusiasm for Jesus' teaching and actions turns to doubt and then to unbelief for many of his audience. But when Jesus asks the twelve disciples if they also want to turn away from him, Peter answers with a question of his own: "Lord, to whom can we go?" (6:68) I think that is a hugely important question, one which gets to the fundamental truths of our faith, and therefore one we should still ask ourselves and reflect on today. I am going to attempt to explain why I think it is so important.

Chapter 6 of John's gospel starts with the feeding of the five thousand with the two fish and five loaves, which seem to come from a boy's packed lunch. It is not surprising therefore that when Jesus takes his teaching further he refers to himself as the bread of life and the living bread. But the bread he provides is not like the manna which fed the Israelites as they fled Egypt, mentioned here in verse 58, or those five loaves with which he fed the huge and hungry crowd. It is much more than that. It gives us – Jesus gives us - everything we need to sustain us in our journey with God. He is our daily bread.

Jesus also meets our needs through what he says as well as what he is. As Peter says to him, "You have the words of eternal life." Jesus repeats the words life and living again and again in this passage; he is the way to eternal life. "I am the living bread...live forever...I will give for the life of the world...those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...whoever eats me will live because of me...the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." (6:51-63) We have the advantage of knowing this is true. However, those there at the time did not know what would happen next, and these words must have been

startling, indeed shocking, especially as Jesus says he is “the living bread that came down from heaven.” (6:51) Not only did this man, who we are told many of them knew as Joseph the carpenter’s son, claim that he was the way to eternal life, but he said he was from heaven; mind blowing then and even now I think!

Christ also said that “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (6:56) What did he mean by “abide in me, and I in them.”? I think this tells us that by sharing in Jesus’ gift of eternal life we are brought to be with him and each other in love and unity as his disciples. He will always be with us and we will always be with him. That starts now, it is not a future hope. Eternal life comes from knowing God and Jesus now. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus defines it thus, “.this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (17:3) It is now. When Peter asked Jesus “Lord, to whom can we go?” the answer then was that there was no-one else and nowhere else to go to. And the same is true now.

So Jesus provides us with all that we need. How does he show this? Well, he came from heaven to sacrifice himself for us, and there can be no greater love possible than that, although Peter and the rest of the twelve had perhaps not fully grasped that by this stage. Jesus says that he came down from heaven; as the disciples question his teaching he tells them that he will return to heaven, “ascending to where he was before.” (6:62) He was laying everything out for his audience, even if they found it hard to accept.

It was not just by his sacrifice that Christ showed he could provide us with all that we need. Even when Jesus did ascend to heaven, he did not leave his disciples alone, without support. He talked to them of “the spirit that gives life,” adding that “the flesh is useless.” (6:63) The disciples did not need to rely on their own strength to follow Christ and live in his light and love, as even when he was no longer on earth the Holy Spirit, “the spirit that gives life,” would be with them. And that is true for us too. We do not need to rely on our own strength, or material things, the “useless” flesh, we can depend on the Spirit to help us and guide us.

Jesus, then, shows that he sustains us through his sacrifice and through the spirit. He also brings us together as a community, in love and unity. We are called to share our lives with God and his people. Peter did not just answer for himself when Jesus asked the twelve, he answered for them all, a community brought together by Christ. This feels especially important now, as after all this

time kept apart by Covid we will soon be able to share in more services and events together, meeting more regularly as a community and church family. We are still, just as those first disciples were, drawn and held together in the love of Christ to rejoice in his word. But, although Peter responded to Jesus on behalf of all the disciples, we all have to choose for ourselves whether we, like Peter, believe that Jesus has the words of eternal life. After all, the disciples has all taken the initial decision to follow Jesus for themselves. We may be a community of disciples, but we all have an individual and personal relationship with Jesus, such as we cannot have with anyone else.

Finally, I just want to touch a bit more on what was difficult for the crowds to accept about Jesus' teaching. What was Peter agreeing to continue with? I think there could be many points here that were hard to accept; as I have already mentioned, the idea that Jesus had come from and would return to heaven would have been shocking. I also think that the new relationship with God to which Jesus called the people would have seemed unsettling. It came through his life and death, and was – and is - based on love. Through Jesus, people were, and are, offered a more intimate, closer relationship with God, even a friendship. And that brings us eternal life. It is worth saying again that eternal life starts now, not in the future, and it starts when we enter into friendship with God. There is no other way; our only true purpose comes from our relationship with God. This is what Peter was agreeing to, and is why he acknowledged Jesus as the Holy One of God, a title given in Isaiah to the redeemer, defender and king of Israel. (Isa 41:14, 43:14-15, for example) And it is why we should acknowledge him as such too.

Peter asked Jesus “Lord, to whom can we go?” Our knowledge of what Jesus has done prepares us to respond, and the answer that Jesus knows is coming is always that we have to go to Christ. Why? Well, he has the words of eternal life. He is our daily bread who gives us all that we need. He has sent the Holy Spirit to guide and help us; we never need to rely solely on our own strength. Jesus has brought us into a new, more personal and loving relationship with God, and into a community of faith with each other. He has brought eternal life into the present. Now, just as when Peter was speaking to Jesus, there is no one else to go to for these things; now, as then, Jesus has the words of eternal life; now, as then, Jesus is the Holy One of God. We have to go to him.

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