

Sunday between 21st and 27th August [21]

John 6:56-69

Well surely no one is surprised to hear those words again from today's Gospel reading, "I am the bread from heaven". We hear repeated the final verse from last week's gospel in case we have forgotten the theme of bread that we have been following these past few weeks. But as the reading goes on it appears that we are not alone in bread fatigue. There were others, many others at the time, who found this to be a difficult teaching. Jesus' metaphorical talk of bread was beyond them, his suggestion that they eat of him, his flesh and blood, made them nauseated. They decided that if Jesus' teaching was going to be uncomfortable and challenging in this way, they would rather not hear it. We are told that from that time on many of his disciples withdrew and didn't go about with him anymore.

What a huge disappointment that must have been. Not just for Jesus to lose many disciples but for the disciples themselves to think that they had found the answers to the questions they were asking in Jesus only to later be unable to follow him. Perhaps some were feeling betrayed by Jesus, feeling that his teaching had led them into a false sense of security up until this time but now he had shown himself to be something other than what they imagined. I wonder how many were deeply saddened by this encounter or angry with Jesus.

Few if any of them would have felt that they did anything wrong, that they had the problem. That's just our experience of working with and around lots of people of lots of generations and how they react almost without exception when there is a relationship breakdown. We all of us see the problems with the other person, that is why relationships break down, we don't get along either over many small things or as in this case, because of one big argument. And we describe the happenings in terms of what the other person said and did. We do it from our childhood. The smallest children recount unpleasant exchanges with their peers in terms of what the other child did or didn't do that caused them pain, sadness or anger. They rarely if ever open the story with what they may have done to contribute to the situation, parents often listen to such stories from school, hearing all about how the other child was very mean and naughty, how sad that made them, but parents usually have to ask, "and what did you say, what did you do?" and with those answers there is often a far fuller picture.

So what did these disciples do to contribute to their moving away from Jesus? Nothing, according to scripture, they grumbled about the words he spoke and they withdrew. Well inaction can be just as damaging as action. They didn't talk to Jesus and explain to him directly what it was they were struggling with. They didn't ask for clarification of his words, they didn't even go to his closest companions to see if they had some insight that could be of use, they grumbled amongst themselves, with other people who were just like them, had the same views as them, and were bolstered in their opinions that this Jesus was taking them in the wrong direction, he was the one who had lost the plot, they knew what was acceptable and he was violating that.

They failed to trust Jesus. He had performed miracle after miracle in their sight, he had spoken with authority things which had attracted their attention and inspired

them but they didn't trust him. While Jesus said the things they were comfortable hearing, he was surrounded by people willing to listen. There are many comfortable words attributed to Jesus, we say some of them in our liturgies regularly, "Come to me all who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest", that's beautiful. There are lots more, but what he spoke here is not comfortable. We might be used to reading the bible and have a Christian perspective on this talk of bread and wine, flesh and blood, but the disciples at the time had no such context and it was shocking to hear. We can't underestimate the shock felt at some of the other things Jesus said too, he forgave people's sins, that was shocking, he set himself up as a teacher of God and a prophet yet he spent much of his time with the untouchables of his society, the traitors working for the Romans, the prostitutes, the Samaritans, you name them, Jesus would sit down and eat with them. That was deeply shocking.

Jesus did not come to make people comfortable, he did not enter the world as the incarnate word of God to give us a pat on the back and say well done, keep up the good work. He came to teach humanity, to educate us in God's mission, to truly show us how much God loves us and to make the relationship between humanity and God right so that we could always be in relationship with him. If we think we learned those lessons, have grown from that education, understand and display God's love fully in our lives and live fully in that relationship then we are mistaken. It is unclear how far we have moved on in society since Jesus' time, and Christians haven't got it all together either.

In many ways we have become the respectable part of society, that's the reputation we have. In the name of our faith we do good things, nice things for other people. We support charities, we study scripture together, we try to model what a God centred community should look like. We try to live lives following the example of Jesus. But we rarely shock people. That might have something to do with the fact that Jesus' teaching is no longer new, it's difficult to surprise people with things they have heard before, but that's not the only reason. We don't shock people because we don't go as far as Jesus did. We understand that God loves everyone, from the leaders of the nations to the beggar on the street, but we are more comfortable in the company of people like us. We find it hard to hang out with society's misfits and we do not have the courage to try to make a difference in the halls of power. Jesus was just as comfortable in both places.

Jesus' radical interpretation of love, God's understanding of love, is still as shocking today if we fully think about what that means. Loving our neighbour is fine when we think of that person as living in the house next door, but loving our neighbour the asylum seeker, loving our neighbour who is a drug user, loving our neighbour that society excludes, that's a big ask. Loving them is not just praying for them, although that is something, it is finding a way of getting alongside them, lobbying leaders to make policy to help them, actually spending time in the same room as some of them. We can't do everything, but Jesus' shocking call to us is to do something, and each of our little somethings change the world.

But what of the 12 when they heard Jesus' shocking words, did they flee? No, they stayed, not because they found his words less challenging but they knew he was the messiah, they trusted him completely because they knew he was from God. As Jesus'

disciples today if we have come to know God, how can we turn away from his call to us, however uncomfortable or shocking it is?