

PENTECOST 12B; August 23rd, 2009

John 6:56-69

“No Turning Back”

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Story

When I was a young mum, I used to meet with other young mums from my church – all of us keen Christians; We’d pray together, share our lives, our faith, our struggles. We encouraged and supported each other through good times and bad. There was a song we’d often sing – one of those snappy, happy-clappy choruses, – “I have decided to follow Jesus.....no turning back, no turning back”.

Fifteen, twenty years down the track, where are we all now?

Well, I’m here –and that was quite unthought back then in Sydney - some saw that as a monstrous back-slide and still do ...women priests and high church and the like. And the others? Four left the church–not all of them necessarily giving God away completely – a couple of them dug into new age spiritualities; another one became a disciple of a well-known American self-help guru; and three others have gone on strong in the church.

This gives us a 50% drop-out rate. What happened? Lots of things, but a bottom line that life, the church, and commitment were hard.

Sound familiar? I doubt if there is anyone here who hasn’t experienced something similar in their own circle of family and friends. And this is by no means a problem of today’s fast and complex society.

The Gospel: Many Turned Back

“Many of Jesus’ disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” , our Gospel reading tells us this morning. What happened?

These followers –not his inner twelve - weren’t leaving him because of circumstances, or because a better offer came along. These were those people who had very recently partaken of the miraculous loaves and fishes meal. These were people who kept following him – almost chasing him – because they saw the signs – miracles – he was doing. It seemed they couldn’t get enough of that. It seems they kept coming for what they could get – something which Jesus challenges them about.

But Jesus hadn’t stopped at miracles – he taught and talked about who he was. He called himself “the Bread of Life; the bread that came down from heaven”. In strong and unequivocal terms, he told his listeners – both his followers and the conventional followers of Judaism – that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.....those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...they abide in me and me in them”. Shocking words to hear, and the Greek is very graphic- gnawing, chewing on his flesh, not just an easy swallow of something palpable. It smacks of cannibalism (which, of course, the early Church was accused of).

Hard Words, Soft Words

Words like this, language like this, ideas like these, up the ante in discipleship. There is an invitation- maybe even a menace for some- in these words that our following of Christ could take us further than being a member of a cheer squad, further than having a nice, charismatic person of God do good things for us and others. It even takes us into the irrational or beyond the rational. As his disciples hear it, as we hear it for ourselves now, this Jesus is taking them somewhere that they don't want to go. Miracles are fine, the presence of God with us is fine –eternal life is fine, but this eating flesh and drinking blood??

So what happened? Many were offended, and grumbled, and drew away from him because of his “hard words”, his difficult teaching. Unacceptable, offensive words. Too hard to hear and accept. In fact, they were scandalized.

I think we all like the *soft* words of Jesus. God loves us, accepts us, includes us all. He cares for us; we experience his care through his body, the church. We have times of awareness of his presence, of communion with him. We know the comfort and love of God through those hard times of life that none of us can avoid. Soft words, even if the times are hard.

If we left the eating of his flesh and drinking his blood as a “bread of life’ metaphor, we could keep these as soft words. Bread as a staple food. Bread evoking images of the manna from God with which the Israelites were fed in the wilderness back in Moses’ times. God providing what is needed. The manna itself was soft and sweet, melting in the mouth. But Jesus’ words, with different words for “eat” in the Greek, blast away any notions of keeping this metaphorical - the ancestors *sipped* on the manna – while Jesus talks about *gnawing* his flesh – not some dainty sort of eating.

Why are these hard words? The physicality of Jesus’ words – flesh, gnawing, blood – point to the stark reality of the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus the bread, come down from heaven. God in the flesh and blood, asking us to feed on him. The invitation is to chew thoroughly, swallow, digest. The implication is that if it’s something that’s going down too easily, we might be missing the real thing.

This goes further than the metaphor. This goes further than trying to equate Jesus’ flesh with scripture, that is, feeding on Christ being the same as feeding on his word, his scriptures, as some teach. Jesus is saying *he* is the *food* that gives life, not just nourishment, but eternal life; and our flesh – all the things of our world and our selves - can’t give us this eternal life. Only God, through Christ, can. And here, we’re confronted with the Eucharist, with the complex mystery of the flesh and blood of Jesus found in the Eucharist. We’re confronted with the body of Christ as Church, nourishing us; we’re challenged by the work of the spirit, giving us this life.

The Call

These **are** hard words. Not just difficult to understand, but demanding and undoubtedly offensive to some. Threatening to our self-sufficiency. We’re being called to sink our teeth deeper into what God is offering us – more than sipping or nibbling. God is offering us his very self – Jesus giving himself to us totally. We’re being called to consume Christ fully, being called into a faith for us to express totally, in body, mind and spirit; a faith that calls us

directly into participation in and commitment to his body, the church; a faith that cannot be confined to some small compartment of our lives.

Like my old friends, like the many disciples, maybe there are times when we want to leave; when what it seems we being called to or asked to do, to commit, is more than we can stomach.

I suspect we all move somewhere between wanting just the manna, the soft words, and chewing on and at times swallowing the harder food. Somewhere between bits of our self consumed into Christ, and our whole self drawn deeply into him as we've taken him more deeply into ourselves.

The Good News is, no matter what we feel, the Eucharist is no less effective - this is still the body and blood of Christ nourishing and restoring us; giving us life; we are still being fed on Christ, by Christ. There's wonderful hope and potential in that.

When many turned away from Jesus, he asked his close circle of the twelve disciples: "Do you want to go away, too?"

Simon Peter answered him: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Jesus asked them "Do you want to go away, too?"

Today, as you join your life with Christ's and with the whole body of his Church in the Eucharist, how might you answer Christ?