

Homily for Pentecost 13, 2021

John 6:56-69

'Remaining with Jesus as many fall away'

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TEXT

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

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INTRODUCTION (280)

Most of you would have filled in the Australian Census in the last couple weeks –
a part of which of course asked about our religious affiliations.

Most commentators are predicting that as with the last census,
And the one before that,
And the one before that,

The number of people in our country claiming even just an *association* with Christianity will decline.

When it comes to actual church attendance,
I think it's even worse.

And of course, the situation is very similar throughout the western world.

Not the whole world, mind you,

But you and I find *ourselves* in a time and place when **many** have given up on the
Christian faith,

or in the words of our text,
they have '*turned back*' from walking with Jesus.

You see,
Our situation is nothing new, in a sense,

Even in Jesus own ministry,
He faced situations where many fell away,
gave up,
turned back.

In the face of this Jesus' word to his closest disciples,
And to you and me,
Is a confronting one,

What about you?
'*Do you also wish to go away?*'

We'll come back to that later.

But one of the very simple but profoundly significant things about our text,
Which is such good news for us,

Is that as all these people leave,

it doesn't surprise Jesus,
It doesn't phase Jesus,

And most importantly it doesn't **stop** Jesus from carrying out the mission he has come to accomplish...

to give his flesh for the life of the world,

to brings the words of eternal life to you.

The question for us then is how we remain with him,
Rather than joining those who turn back from him.

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THOSE WHO TURN BACK (615)

So just why were so many turning back?

We hear in our text,

'When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"'

Then later,

'Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him'.

The struggle is over what Jesus had been teaching.

Jesus has been speaking largely about eternal life with God.

Through this chapter there been a movement,

Where from the miraculous feeding of the 5000,

Jesus has been gradually moving the people from a desire simply to receive bread which will sustain their physical bodies from one day to the next -

Moving them to consider what it is they need to sustain their body and souls into eternity.

He wants to get people to consider more than just *this* life,

to lift their minds to eternal life.

Just a quick word, by the way, about that phrase 'eternal life' in the Bible.

When we hear 'eternal life',
We're not to imagine only a version of this life we know now,
where the only difference is that it never ends.

That can more of a frightening prospect rather than a desirable one.

Instead,
Eternal life is not just different in *quantity*,
but *quality* too,

It a new kind of life,
It's not just infinitely longer,
But it's infinitely deeper, richer, fuller,

It's life of another order,
life truly beyond death,

The life of heaven,
The life of God.

And mysteriously,
a life which we can already enter into now,
Jesus says.

This is what Jesus has been speaking about,

And more specifically that **he is the one** who comes to bring this gift of life.

He's the bread of life,

He's the one who has come down from the Father in heaven,

He's the one who will give his flesh for the life of the world,

And so to truly receive this life Jesus says you need him,

You can't produce it or obtain this by your own strength,

You need him,

To put it in the most dramatic way possible,
you even need, he says, to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

It's this, all of this,

That so many simply found too difficult,

These words were too tough to swallow.

So, they turned back.

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It's still the way today.

The reasons people today turn away from Christ and his Church are many and varied, of course,

There are complexities to it,
Not least how the sins and failures of the Church play into it all.

But you can look at studies and people will tell you in one way or another,

They often can't accept the teaching anymore.

Whether it's the teaching that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God in human flesh,

Whether it's the teaching that his sacrificial death and resurrection is that event which brings forgiveness and eternal life,

Whether it's the teaching of his body and blood being truly present with the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper,

Or whether it's moral teaching to do with sexuality or other lifestyles people want to embrace,

The teaching of Christ and his Apostles is at times difficult,

So difficult people can turn back from walking with Jesus.

Friends,

If you can't sympathise with this,

Let me suggest you're not paying attention when you hear Jesus words.

If we have become so accustomed to the words of our Lord that we hear them and they never challenge us,

Never unsettle us,

If we think we've got it all figured out,

If we never find them difficult in one way or another,

We're either not paying attention or not taking them seriously enough.

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JESUS WHO CHALLENGES (420)

So, how does Jesus respond to this situation though?

He certainly doesn't back down does he!

In fact,

He pushes even harder.

He says,

'Does this offend you?'

Then he goes on to talk about ascending to where he was before.

As if to say,

'Do this offend you?'

You aint seem nothin' yet!

Wait until you see me being lifted up on a cross,
Raised from the grave,
Ascending to the glory of the Father to pour out my Spirit,

All so that you can receive this gift of eternal life!

How are you going to handle that?

In face of difficulty Jesus doesn't back down or make it easier,
He goes deeper,

Because who he is and what he's come to do is non-negotiable,
So important.

And finally with the twelve,
To my mind he's even more challenging.

When all these other disciples leave and it's only him and the twelve left,

What does he say?

Well guys,
'Hard day hey, time for a pep-talk?'

No,

Instead, Jesus looks at the twelve square between the eyes and he says,
'*What about you?*'

He says,
'*Do you also wish to go away?*'

What a challenging word.

What's Jesus up to?

Well one of the things he seems to be doing,

Is turning a somewhat dramatic event into opportunity for spiritual self-examination.

It reminds me very much of what Jesus does elsewhere when his disciples ask him about some tragedies that had happened,
The implication being that perhaps they did something to deserve all this.

Whereas Jesus uses the moment,
To tell them they need to repent.

He essentially says,
Stop looking over there at what's happening,
What going on in you,
Let's worry about that for a moment.

It's something like that here,

All these people are leaving,

Here Jesus is his closest twelve disciples,

But he doesn't say,
'Let's commission some market research to find out the top ten reasons people are leaving.'

He says,
'What about you?'

Now this isn't to say that the Church has no role in seeking out those who have turned away,
Of course we do,
Think the parable of the lost sheep, and so on.

But when we hear of hundreds, thousands,
In our time,
Turning back from walking with the Lord,

Or when we hear of the latest high-profile Christian figure who says they've lost their faith,

Jesus says now is a moment of self-examination,

What about you?

Why do you believe?

Why are you still here?

Do you also want to go away?

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THE TWELVE WHO REMAIN (575)

It's a challenging word,
But Jesus knows what he's doing,

Because notice the *effect*.

Jesus isn't carelessly using challenging words to drive people away,
He searching for faith,

And he knows his Spirit-filled word will call forward faith,

As it does from Peter on behalf of the twelve.

*'Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life,
We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy one of God.'*

There's something beautiful, almost poetic about Peter's response.

So much so that the sentence has found its way into the liturgy of the church hasn't it?

To whom shall we go?

It's one thing to give up on something and turn back,
It's another thing what you now turn to.

This can be the case with anything in life.

Leaving a job,
Taking your children out of a certain school,

There's some difficulty,
You feel like getting out,

But it's often the case that people don't necessarily consider what it is you're turning to.

There's a dynamic very much like this in the spiritual life which Peter's words acknowledge.

Those people who turned back from walking with Jesus,
They'll still be listening to the words of someone,

They'll still be guided in their life by some set of values or principles.

In our Old Testament reading today Joshua's call to the people of old was to choose
whom you will serve,
The so-called gods of Egypt,
Or the Lord.

Acknowledging that we're all religious in some deep way,
We'll always worship something,

Our lives will always revolve around something being at its centre.

The sad thing is most people who turn back from Jesus don't consciously acknowledge
this,
But are simply consumed by the values of the culture around us.

I knew a pastor who related a fascinating conversation to me.

The pastor found himself in conversation with a young person from their congregation
who was struggling with their Christian faith,

In fact intent on giving up on it.

The pastor, partly inspired by Jesus question and Peter's response,

Didn't feel the need to argue too many specific points,

Didn't feel the need to defend the many failures and inadequacies of the Church,

But simply said to the young person,

So, as you think about giving up the Christian faith,

Have you found anything better?

What an inspired question?

The young person didn't really have an answer.

Okay you're turning away because there are some challenges,

But what are you turning to?

Notice in the Apostle Peter's confession,

he doesn't say to Jesus question,

'Oh no there's absolutely no problems here Lord,

We have no difficulties with your teaching whatsoever,

And we're confident if we stick with you we won't have any problems in this life'.

Not only does Peter not say that,

His response implies that all those things might be true.

It's almost as if Peter is saying,

'Lord **even though** your teaching is sometimes difficult,

Even though it can be hard to accept at times,

Even though we may suffer for being with you,

We look around,

and we don't see any alternative,

To one who offers eternal life with God as a gift,

Because we know you,
We trust in you,
you are the holy one of God.'

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CONCLUSION

Friends,

At some time or another,
You will be tempted to turn back from your walk with Jesus.

Some of you have before,

Perhaps for some of you that's where you are in life right now.

So hear again the good news,

Jesus Christ has come down from heaven for you,

He gave his flesh for the life of the world on the cross,

And he rose again,

Ushering in this new, deep and lasting life with God for all who trust in him.

The Father has granted you to come to Jesus,

And the Spirit of God has worked the gift of faith in your hearts through Jesus spirit-filled word.

Trust him and his words,

Eat his flesh and drink his blood,

And you will remain in him and he in you.

In the name of Jesus, **Amen.**