

Where else would I go?

This was in a nut shell Peter's response to Jesus.

For the past five weeks we have heard the Gospel of John's account in chapter 6 of the crowd and the disciples trying to come to grips with Jesus teaching. The whole of chapter 6 weaves in and out with the images of manna – what feeds, sustains and nurtures us. It began with the feeding of the 5000 and continued in discourse as Jesus moved around the lake and the crowd followed, with the final conversation in this passage taking place in the temple courts. Jesus tries to explain what it means to be fed by God. After many days, and much talking and examples the crowd exclaim – this is difficult teaching! And they are right.

It is so difficult that 2000 years on the church dedicates 5 weeks of the 3-year lectionary to this very issue; partly because it is so complex and partly because in the end it is central to our understanding of who Jesus is, and what that means for the development of Christianity.

Many in the crowd following Jesus found this so difficult they dismissed his teaching and left; and so Jesus turned to the disciples and asks them the same – will you be leaving? Peter – always to the point responds – and where would I go!

I like Peter – he knows he doesn't fully understand what Jesus is saying, he knows it is a difficult thing – but he can't see that anyone is offering anything better – and at some level he also gets that Jesus is real – and so responds to that.

So what is it that the crowd are finding so challenging in what Jesus is saying?

To answer this question, we need to understand something about how the crowd, and the disciples are responding in this context which is a little different to us. Firstly, as Christians we are conditioned to respond to this reading with ears that have experienced the Eucharist. When we hear reference to the bread and wine, at some level our brain hopefully makes the connection to the last supper and our sharing in that week after week. Those listening to Jesus don't have this context, so the connection is different.

For the most of the crowd, the connection will actually be with the story of Moses, and at the time of need in the desert, God provides Mana. John particularly tells the story of the crowd's response in a way that mirrors the pattern of the story of the Exodus. Susan Hylan¹, a New Testament Scholar suggests in fact that the irony of the crowds' response is not lost on John.

In the original manna story, the people's response to God's salvation is mixed. Although they initially herald the triumph of God in the Exodus (Exodus 15:1-21), Israel immediately

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3753

begins to “grumble” or “complain” against God and Moses in the wilderness (e.g., Exodus 15:24; 16:2). They do not trust God to take care of them. Over and over, with questions of water, food, and physical safety, the Israelites play out the same drama of whether they will trust God to care for them.

Similarly, the group following Jesus initially receives the miraculous food of Loaves and fishes (John 6:1-14) and heralds Jesus as a prophet (v. 15). But they also begin to “grumble” against Jesus following his teaching about the manna. The response of the disciples to Jesus is an example of the irony for which John is well known: the disciples reject the idea that Jesus is manna, but in doing so they display that Jesus is manna by responding to him just as the Israelites responded to manna².

How true it is that so often our defence of why something is not true, becomes evidence of our belief? Or as Gertrude puts it in Hamlet "*The lady doth protest too much, methinks*". In the end, we have to let go and just get on with it.

So for the modern audience we hear chapter 6 as a defence, or justification for much of what we believe about the Eucharist; for John's initial audience it was a mirror to their distrust of God during the time of the Exodus; and fear of trusting. Both contexts inform our understanding of these passages.

But then there is another theme running through– which is common to all of us, despite the other knowledge we bring to this text. To partake of Jesus as manna involves a reliance on God. One way John expresses this throughout the Gospel is through the word “abide”; and the idea appears many times throughout the entire gospel. But “abiding” with Jesus is difficult. Staying with Jesus and learning from him is a long process. For many, a quick fix would be more attractive. The crowd was initially attracted to Jesus when they saw him as a Moses figure -- one who could work miracles and provide political victories. As they continue with him, they learn that Jesus is not offering an easy victory but the long road of discipleship. This is not what many thought they had signed up for.

This is a common theme in all of the Gospels in that human nature means so often we come to God for a quick fix, for an easy answer, rather than putting in the hard work that will bring an outcome. I am often asked if I really do believe that prayers makes any difference – and I do so believe. But I do not think prayer is an easy answer, or brings immediate response, or even the response we might have hoped for. Prayer is about relying on and abiding in God. It is about patiently working with God, and ourselves to find the answer to those things which concern us and those around. There are times when God does miraculously intervene. But for the most part, intercession is about us working together – abiding together – to bring about change and a world built on love – in a sense letting go of our expectations, relying on God and getting on with it. And on that level the disciples are right – this teaching is not easy!

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3753

This week I have felt at times stretched between two extremes. At one end have been a number of difficult pastoral situations involving people who are extremely vulnerable and walking with them, or maybe even abiding with them, through their difficult journey. At the other end have been early mornings and strange decisions to be made about repairs to the building which have come to a climax in the past 7 days. And somewhere in between have been preparations for Trish's funeral, as well as our day to day, and week by week services in the place.

What I noticed again this week was how much the day to day routines, of prayer, or eating or talking balance out the extremes of difficult decisions. Committing to, or abiding in a process is easier when you give it all up, and just hand it over. This feels quite at odds with a routine that says a healthy life sets good boundaries and limits. I don't know about you, but I really struggle with this – to find the balance between totally committing to all that needs to be done, in a life when nothing ever is really completed, and at the same time finding a balance that allows the rhythm of life and prayer to sustain me. Making the hard choices about what just cannot be achieved at a particular time. There was a point on Thursday I think it was, when I was boiling vinegar in the urn (lime scale build-up); with the undertaker on the phone, a builder was calling down from the scaffolding, and the doorbell rang, when I felt like a cartoon in the Sunday funny pages! I just started laughing – which helped a lot. (Though our builder may think I am a little mad!)

It helped for a few reasons – it put things in context, this was one crazy moment in an otherwise interesting week; but most importantly it made me stop for a minute and look at what I was doing and consider if and how I was relying on God. And in stopping my mind was drawn back to the passage we read this morning and Peter's response "but where else would I go?"

Life on some days may feel overwhelming or stretched. Faith too on some days may feel distant and complex. But our readings today remind us that even Jesus disciples, and Jesus himself knew that abiding in faith would be difficult at times.

In a week when we farewell a loved and long term member of our congregation, I am reminded of Trish's commitment to be thankful for each day, to recognise what was possible and to enjoy it. Trish in many ways embodied much of Jesus promise to abide in God's love – and to live within what we have – and sometimes that means surrounded by love and hope we just have to let it go and trust!

I think too, the disciples remind us that somethings we do, even things we have to do in faith, are difficult and take courage.

In the end, we are called to abide which is the example Peter gives us. He knows there is no other path for him than the one he has chosen, and at many levels he just gets on with it. It reminded me of a poem I saw once.

LET IT GO by Leunig

Let it go,

Let it out,

Let it all unravel,

Let it free

And it will be

A path on which to travel.³

Amen

³ <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/poems>