One of my favourite movies in the 1990’s was pretty woman – a supposedly modern fairy tale. But there is a wonderful line in it when Julia Roberts asks her friend ‘don’t you want to get out of here?’ and her friend answer ‘but where would I go!’.

It is a common question – one a suspect many of us have either asked or answered. Where else would I go?

This was in a nutshell Peter’s response to Jesus after he asks if he wants to leave.

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 mana – 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 continues to be an image or concept which we struggle to understand and embrace- 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 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 most of the crowd, the connection will 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 – we have reflected on this over the past weeks – the crowd is responding to links with Moses and how this led to a fear of trusting during the time of the Exodus*[[1]](#footnote-1).*

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

There is one theme in this teaching however which is common to us all -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 prayer 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!

This week I suspect like many of you I have felt overwhelmed by the events with the world, from the evolving situation in Afghanistan and then Haiti; as well as the ongoing pandemic – let alone the environmental issues of more fires and floods. I have had several emails and messages from people saying – what are we doing? It is a good question. And there are practical things we can and will be doing. But for the most part, what we can do is pray – offering it all up. This is not a glib answer; rather it is more like the answer Peter gave Jesus – regardless of the challenges where else would I go; regardless of the pain what else can I do. Prayer is what helps us work together, abide in God and abide with each other. Prayer is what draws us back to a space that helps us to see what is important, what might be possible and listen for how we might make a difference.

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.

One of the things I like about the lectionary is it links up readings from different time periods. And so it is we hear this morning from Joshua who raises the question of choosing to follow God – just as Jesus will ask Peter many years later.

In Joshua in chapter 24 gathers the tribes together and he reminds them of their history. He then gives them a choice, either believe and follow, or if you do not believe choose then who you will follow!

As we come to the end of many weeks considering the meaning and implications of John 6, our readings invite us to consider the same question which Joshua and Jesus present. Do we believe in the sustaining and nurturing power of God and – are we prepared to abide within it!

It may be that like Peter we can see no other options; or that like the tribes in Joshua we are able to claim more confidently that ‘*that we also will serve the Lord, who is our God’.* However we answer, the action we are called to is the same.

To abide in God requires a relationship based on daily and relentless prayer – which binds us all in discerning how we can move forward. It is not a quick fix – rather it is the hard work of working together to bring about change. Because in this daily prayer we are sustained by the God who feeds us. Amen.

1. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=3753 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)