

Year B Proper 21, 25th August 2024

Joshua 24: 1-21 & 14-18, Ephesians 6: 10-20, John 6: 56-69

Can I start by saying how good it is to have members of the Crescendo Choir with us today, along with Rose on piano and Tom the conductor, teacher and coach and all-round inspiration trying to get the best from a group of enthusiastic amateur singers.

I sense some parallels between leading a choir and our gospel reading today, which I shall come to shortly.

This is the fifth week running that our Gospel readings have been from the 6th chapter of John's gospel. Chapter 6 is called the 'Bread of Life discourse', and I am not offering any prizes for guessing why!

And today we have just heard the last rather large mouthful of chapter 6 of John's gospel, with some challenging bits to chew on.

Jesus makes very clear, using visceral language, that feeding on him brings eternal life. Even some of his disciples found this almost cannibalistic language difficult to hear. And I think the Bible translators found the disciples responses difficult to acknowledge and chose to water down the language somewhat.

Our NIV translation that I read today has the disciples saying 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' The original Greek should more accurately be translated as 'This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?'

In the 'Bread of Life discourse', Jesus had been preaching over a few days to his wider group of followers. He has been exploring the difference between physical food that sustains for a while, and the spiritual food that he provides that sustains those who wish to receive it, for ever. And yet quite a few of Jesus' followers found that teaching difficult and stopped following him. It seems the last straw for some of them was when Jesus said, "I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."

The twelve stalwart disciples were asked if they too wanted to leave. Simon Peter spoke for them, and in his words confessed Jesus as having the words of eternal life. They did not just **believe** that Jesus was the Holy One of God, they **knew** he was the Holy One of God. Simon Peter was expressing the difference

between an opinion - what the disciples thought - and what they knew through their first-hand experiences of Jesus' ministry.

We are not like Simon Peter and the disciples – we do not have the first-hand experience and witness of the works and life of Jesus. So, as Plato would remind us, today we have a belief, a faith. A belief built upon scripture and its exposition, built upon our experiences in church and outside of church, where we have sensed and experienced the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. Some of those experiences will feel so powerful that they may be to us a first-hand experience of Jesus or a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

In our modern world, many people like to think everything is rational and evidenced through physical and observed experiences. Whereas the church is offering something quite counter-cultural. It is offering a chance to connect with something beyond us, what some call 'the more' or 'the other'. The church is offering an opportunity to experience the spiritual dimension that is deep within each one of us. To come and stand on Holy Ground, to acknowledge God within each one of us, and know that every other person on this planet is also made in the image of God and is loved by God. And, of course, the Holy Ground is anywhere and everywhere, not just in church.

And just like the difficulties Jesus had holding on to some of his followers who found His teaching difficult and weren't willing or able to listen to what Jesus was saying – so today's church faces similar challenges. People who don't want to join an organisation, who want to do their own thing, who object to a particular teaching, or whatever; who are seeking their own spiritual path. So maybe today's churches aren't so terribly different from the challenges Jesus faced!

And there are also parallels to leading or being a member of a choir. As members we experience Tom's leadership, and do our best to follow his instructions and his knowledge of how to sing well. I guess Tom will have experienced times when people reject his teaching and decide to go off and do something else.

And the parallels don't stop there. Singers singing on their own can gain a lot of satisfaction from their engagement with music, but nothing can beat being part of a bigger group, where harmonies resonate, where the dynamics of the voices makes for a completely different sound, and where singing together makes a deep connection between the members.

People may choose their own spiritual path, but it is only in coming together with others, to sing, pray, recite liturgy, share communion, and worship, that we get the full experience and can be fully nourished and fed. Someone once described church and faith to me by saying there may be many days when it rains or when there is high humidity, but it is only in when you drink water that your thirst is satisfied. Church is like that – our faith sustains us, but it cannot quench our thirst. We need to meet together to take a spiritual drink. As a Christian community gathered here in West Linton, God calls us to love one another, and to love our neighbours. We won't always get it right, but that's OK, because we are human, and whilst trying to follow the way of Jesus, we will fall short from time to time.

Just as each individual member of a choir does their best to give a faultless performance but won't always get it absolutely right. Again, we are all human, and in seeking to do our best we gain new insights and support each other to do better.

And church is where we come together, and despite our human faults, we can hopefully say, just as Simon Peter said, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." A God of grace and mercy. A God of love and deep compassion, wishing shalom, salaam, deep peace, to all.

May we all want to seek and hold that peace, and may we pray that peace into the hearts of all who have no peace. May we all acknowledge that we are made in God's image, and are loved by God, just as we are. When we look at each other, stranger or friend, may we see another person loved by God. That to me, is a major aspect of being a follower of the way of Christ. I pray you may too.