

Dorset South and West Circuit
Service for 25 August 2024 by Revd Gwyneth Owen

Welcome to this act of worship, wherever you are using it. The invitation is to read the words slowly – there's no bus to catch!

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. (Psalm 84;1-2)*

Hymn

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy One, is here;
come bow before him now with reverence and fear:
in him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;
he burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned:
how awesome is the sight, our radiant king of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place:
he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace –
no work too hard for him, in faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

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Prayer

Gracious God, we come to you in prayer. We open ourselves to your presence even though we struggle to picture you or to understand fully the scope of your Being. We reflect on your presence, glory and power – three words full of promise, energy and invitation in our lives. Give us a sense of being on holy ground because it is ground we share with you. Stir our imaginations so that we are lifted beyond our own self-understanding into the realms of your Spirit and to the beauty of who you are. Inspire us through Jesus Christ in whose life we are stirred to offer you worship and praise. Amen.

John 6: 56-69

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This 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.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But 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. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

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

Reflection

Have you ever been in situations where you feel you have drawn the short straw? Well, I feel it now as I reflect on this Bible passage from John chapter 6. This is the fifth and final week that the lectionary reading is from this chapter about Jesus and bread. That's a lot of bread!

Chapter 6 begins with something very familiar- the feeding of the 5,000 when the boy's 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish proved to be more than enough in the hands of Jesus. This is followed by Jesus walking on water that evening and the crowd looking for him the next day, doubtless hoping for more bread and being bamboozled when Jesus declared himself to be the Bread of Life come down from heaven. There follows grumbling from some Jews who think Jesus has illusions of grandeur because they know his father and mother and they know where he comes from -and it's not heaven. They become even more agitated when Jesus tells them that the bread he offers is his own flesh, enabling them to live for ever.

And that brings us to the reading above set for this week – one that is not easy to understand, I think. Perhaps a good place to start is that as this whole bread story develops in chapter 6, John shifts attention to those to whom Jesus is speaking. It begins with him speaking to **"the crowds"**, then the focus is on **"the Jews"** who are suddenly in the Capernaum synagogue, then to **"disciples"** and then to **"the twelve"**. I've been asking myself with whom I identify most in these different groups – and I'm inviting you, dear reader, to do the same. Let's start with "the crowds".

The crowds at the beginning of John chapter 6 felt Jesus was a worthwhile rabbi to go out of their way to listen to. The crowd didn't want to miss the healing action – he had something for them and they wanted more. The crowd followed him and were rewarded by being fed literally and metaphorically.

John chapter 6 then focuses away from the crowd to **"the Jews"**. Let's be clear, this is not all Jews. It was some Jewish leaders and they began to grumble about Jesus' teaching because it seemed to fly in the face of every tradition they cherished. The words that begin our Bible passage for today are addressed to them and they are truly controversial and, even, confrontational: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me". Now, to Christian ears today this sounds like a description of Holy Communion – we are used to this form of words and we take it metaphorically. In its original setting it would have been a total bombshell. It was anathema to Jews to consume blood and strictly forbidden in their scriptures. Jesus challenged the very core of their beliefs, their scriptures, their tradition. It seems as though Jesus was saying that people cannot abide in him – make their home with him -unless they have his very life flowing through their veins.

A third group, **"the disciples"** -followers of Jesus - objected to all this talk about eating and drinking flesh and blood – it was all too hard and they began to drift away. They went

their separate ways from Jesus especially when they heard Jesus say some of them did not believe, did not trust him.

This leaves the fourth group, **“the twelve”** who have heard all this teaching and debate, and seen people turn away from Jesus. Jesus asked them a direct question: ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Gosh, I wonder how long the reply took? When it came it was Peter who acted as spokesman and acknowledged Jesus as the “holy one of God” who has the words of eternal life.

I said at the start of this reflection that I’ve been asking myself with whom I identify most in these different groups. Let’s see:

I can relate to the crowd. Can you? There are many times the ministry of Jesus has fed me, found me, met me, opened me to the mystery of God. Yes, I can relate to wanting more, too. Are you able to relate to this?

I can relate to “the Jews”, too. Can you? I often struggle to know what needs to be let go of that is a cherished tradition but is now getting in the way of God’s work. Can you think of any examples, I wonder?

I can relate to “the disciples”, too. Can you? Sometimes the life of faith seems hard – “the teaching is too difficult”. Carrying crosses, turning the other cheek, forgiving an inordinate amount of times, trusting God when the world seems to have gone mad, continually looking out for neighbour – all these things and more beside are sometimes difficult. It’s easy to turn away for a day, a week, a month isn’t it? And for some, much longer

I can relate to “the twelve” - thank God. Can you? Indeed, “to whom shall we go”? For me, Jesus is the magnet that pulls me to the deeper presence of God by the mysterious working of the spirit. Do you feel that pull I wonder?

It’s so easy when reading the Bible for us to relate to one character more than others. I’ve suggested today that it may be helpful to see in ourselves traits of the 4 main groups in this passage. Surely it is in honest reflection that the ground is cleared for a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, the one who brings life – in bread and in so many others ways too. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God, we offer you our prayers for others, conscious that we may sometimes be the answer to our prayers. We pray for:

- Our government – may it know your wisdom as it seeks to address the injustices and inequalities that lead to hatred and division. PAUSE
- All who work in the police and other emergency services especially those who put themselves at risk for others – may they know your strength and courage. PAUSE
- Those who feel isolated and misunderstood – may they know your friendship. PAUSE
- Those whose lives have hit rock-bottom – may they know your hope. PAUSE

- Our own church and community – may we help each other flourish. PAUSE
- Ourselves – by the power of your Spirit, may we continue to grow into the likeness of Christ. PAUSE.

We offer our prayers in the name of Christ. Amen.

The Lord's prayer.....

Hymn

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
 I have heard my people cry.
 All who dwell in dark and sin
 my hand will save.
 I, who made the stars of night,
 I will make their darkness bright.
 Who will bear my light to them?
 Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
 I have heard you calling in the night.
 I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
 I will hold your people in my heart.*

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
 I have borne my people's pain.
 I have wept for love of them.
 They turn away.
 I will break their hearts of stone,
 give them hearts for love alone.
 I will speak my words to them.
 Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord.

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
 I will send the poor and lame.
 I will set a feast for them.
 My hand will save.
 Finest bread I will provide
 till their hearts be satisfied.
 I will give my life to them.
 Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord.

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May the blessing of God Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us now and remain with us
 always Amen