

# *The Bread of Life*

*The sermon given at Evensong, on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*John 6:15-69*

“Do you also wish to go away?”

Jesus’s words to Peter are his words to us today...“Do you also wish to go away?”

Because there might be all sorts of reasons why you might wish to give up on God and Jesus and the Church – people do all the time.

- You might feel too battered by your experience of life to go on trusting that God is good. St Teresa of Ávila famously said to God, “If this is how you treat your friends then it is no wonder you have so few of them!” - Following Jesus doesn’t protect you from the disappointments and griefs and losses of life, and for some, that isn’t compatible with faith in a ‘Good God’,
- Some people give up on God because of the church. The failure of Christians to make the gospel credible through the way we live is often cited as a reason why people reject faith. “Religion just causes violence”, some say, “The church is homophobic, patriarchal, controlling and full of abuses – If that is what God is like, I don’t want anything to do with Him.”
- Some people give up on Christianity because it seems so exclusive in its claims. I have a friend who is very intelligent and a very spiritual man - brought up a Roman Catholic, he’s explored a number of religions, he practises meditation every day and is active in campaigning for issues of peace and justice. But he tells me he “can’t accept the Jesus bit – it’s too exclusive. Where does it leave the sincere followers of other religions? You can’t just dismiss them.”

So folk have all sorts of reasons for not wanting to follow Jesus: problems with life; problems with the church; problems with Jesus himself.

Our reading from John's Gospel this evening doesn't explore them all, but that last objection is certainly in people's minds – Jesus has been saying things about himself that his own followers find difficult, never mind anyone else! -

<sup>51</sup> *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

His disciples say, <sup>60b</sup> *"This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"* How can this local boy from Nazareth put himself on the same footing as God?

<sup>61</sup> *"Does this offend you?"* He asks. <sup>62</sup> *"Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"* <sup>63</sup> *It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* <sup>64</sup> *But among you there are some who do not believe."*

So, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him: the demands seemed too great; the vista seemed too high; the problems seemed too many. But the twelve, the inner circle, remained. And Jesus turns to them - what about you, he seems to say, <sup>67b</sup> *"Do you also wish to go away?"*

Peter doesn't seem to have any answer to the problems. He can tell that life will probably continue to be hard. He can tell that the other disciples, Judas included, are a pretty mixed bunch who don't especially commend themselves. And his understanding of Jesus remains imperfect and he can't answer all the intellectual objections. Yet he says, <sup>68b</sup> *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life"*

Peter hasn't examined Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam (which wasn't available yet), so he isn't passing judgement on anyone else. He can't pretend to answer the problem of other religions. And he hasn't worked out the doctrine of the Trinity or even yet witnessed the resurrection, so there isn't yet any great intellectual foundation for what he says: it's simply that he's seen enough of Jesus to sense that here, he is in contact with the words of eternal life; it's simply that he doesn't know where or whether he's going to find anything better, anyone more reliable, anyone more alive, or anyone who could be closer to God

“Lord, to whom shall we go?” The rest of the world seems dark and uninviting if it has to be faced without Jesus. Peter has experienced enough of Jesus to be able to say <sup>69</sup>  
*“We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”*

So we hear the Lord’s words to Peter, addressed also to us this evening – “Do you also wish to go away?”. And like Peter, we might look around and see many people drifting away – and yet be left wondering - Where are they going? Where are they going to find anything better than Jesus – the one who feeds us with the presence of God’s love, the one who has the words of eternal life?

Peter and company didn’t get it all right from that moment, but it was a decisive step – it was a decision they knew they had made.

So what about you and me? We can only answer for ourselves. But the question still hangs in front of us, as the Lord holds us in his loving gaze. “What about you? Do you also wish to go away?” –

- Or have you discovered something in the depths of your heart, something that you can’t let go of, something that speaks to you of eternal life?

Amen.

## Reading Texts

John 6:51-69

<sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." <sup>52</sup> The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" <sup>53</sup> So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; <sup>55</sup> for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. <sup>56</sup> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> 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 forever." <sup>59</sup> He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. <sup>60</sup> When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" <sup>61</sup> But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup> It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup> 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. <sup>65</sup> And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." <sup>66</sup> Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup> So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" <sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."