

Commit to following the way of Jesus

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Pentecost + 13 – John 6.56-69... eat my flesh and drink my blood
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This is the year when the Church all over the world reads the Gospel of Mark. But for the past month, we've been reading the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. We started this just as we were about to read Mark's account of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. Instead of reading it in Mark's version, we swapped to John's. And since then, we've stayed with John 6 where the theme is belief in Jesus who calls himself the living bread from heaven.

These weeks with John 6 mean we don't simply witness a miracle and move on, but we stay and learn what it calls from us; it's a call to deepen our faith and live it out in a way that bears witness to the character of Jesus; it's a call to be disciplined. It's also a chance to deepen our thinking about the Holy Communion. John doesn't actually give an account of the Last Supper, but rather teaches us about it by building on the sign of Jesus multiplying a boy's bread and fish to feed everyone around him.

Today, when we hear Jesus describing himself as *the bread that came down from heaven* – and that *whoever eats [him] will live forever* – John wants us to see in this a definite continuity with Jesus' multiplication of the bread; a continuity that carries into our weekly practice of Holy Communion, where Jesus continues to feed all of us. All the way through John 6, the challenge to believe is not the common one of whether or not we can accept that the sign of the feeding happened just as it was described. We're called to look beyond that

question. We're called to respond to the one that the sign points to – we're called to respond to the call to believe in Jesus.

The sign directs us to give attention to the one who shows us what God is really like; the one who shows us God who provides for all, unconditionally, who loves all unconditionally; God whose providence multiplies grace, love and justice.

These characteristics are most perfectly shown in the life and witness of Jesus. So in John's Gospel, rather than a shared meal on the eve of the crucifixion, **it is the whole earthly life of Jesus which institutes the sacrament of the Eucharist.**

This means sharing in the Eucharistic meal means more than remembering or commemorating one particular event; rather, it's a sharing in all of Jesus' life, including ultimately his death and resurrection.' NISB 1920

One of the challenges of this chapter in John is the astonishing way Jesus expresses himself. *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.* We know that most people there found these words from Jesus very hard to hear. And that difficulty remains for many. Jesus says that HE is the food that gives life, not Manna or any other bread.

And it's through eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6.53-6) in the Eucharist that we fully share in him and that we embody him.' NISB 1920 We proclaim this in our Eucharistic prayers each week.

But the language of these prayers varies from church to church. There's plenty of variety; a whole continuum from HC/ the Eucharist being an act of remembrance and no more, to it being a literal partaking in Christ's flesh and blood. But across that spectrum, we agree that joining in HC/ the Eucharist embodies a relationship between Jesus and the believer which contains within it the promise of new life.

John the Evangelist declares that Jesus is the flesh and blood Word of God – the almighty creator of the universe. Yet today, he also shows us how Jesus' most recent followers melt away appalled by his difficult call to eat his flesh and drink his blood. So Jesus is also the one who ends up abandoned to his first tiny band of disciples – and to us. Then Jesus addresses you and me directly. As he asks the twelve who remain with him, he also asks you and me *'Do you also wish to go away?'*

In this chapter and throughout John's Gospel, Jesus calls us to move from a faith based on miracles that fulfil our own physical needs to a faith that is total trust in him, and in his words; words that can appear foolish, absurd, impossible, even scandalous.

John 6 is a difficult passage for us all. Jesus leads us from the excitement and enthusiasm of star-struck, new discipleship to one of sustained mutual love and friendship; a discipleship that is more hidden and humble. It's the long road of choosing to be trustworthy, decent people; people who persist in believing that the cost of compassion and love, and the daily fight against injustice, greed and deceit abuse are sustained at a personal level by a lifelong commitment to following the way of Jesus. Are we prepared for that journey?

In God's providence, those first disciples were able to travel that road. Jesus says to such as these, ⁴⁰ *This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.*

Do you also wish to go away? Simon Peter spoke for us when the challenge was most intense, ⁶⁸ *... 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

We go to Jesus – we go with Jesus; we follow him.

I pray that these six Sundays with the Bread of Life, the Word

made flesh – our retreat from the headlong energy of Mark's Gospel – gives us a deeper insight into both Gospels, and food for our journey with Jesus. Amen