

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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WHERE TO TURN

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Psalm 13
John 6:56-69

One of the churches that I worked for while I was in the United States was a suburban Methodist church in Mount Prospect, greater Chicago. It was a fairly lively church that ran a daily nursery and various programmes for children on a Sunday, and they also tried to take care of people at the other end of life. One of the ways that they did this was to hold a monthly gathering known as the "Up and Comers." The Up and Comers were people, all elderly and many infirm, who had summoned up effort and determination and got up and dressed and ready to take the lifts that were offered to bring them down to the church premises to get together for a lunch and maybe a short talk. The getting together was the main part for most of them.

In the two years I was with that church I used to help with the Up and Comers – it made a change from the youth group! One meeting I remember well because on that day, as well as the usual people turning up a young couple who were new to the area appeared in our midst. I remember the bemused look on their faces, as they regarded the geriatric people among whom they found themselves. It turned out that they had been in church on the Sunday, seen that this meeting was advertised, and had not made any enquiries about it. By its name they assumed it was for young people in their twenties, who were the up and coming generation, and they were more than a little surprised to find that they had made the wrong assumption. Despite warm invitations on all sides, they did not stay for lunch. This was not what they had expected, not what they had thought they were getting involved in.

That was how it was for those of the wider circle of followers who we read about this morning. Jesus had been giving some very difficult teaching, teaching that we still find it hard to get our heads around. He had been talking about himself as the bread of heaven, and about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Now we probably still misunderstand these words, because when we hear that we can't help but think of Communion. But Jesus actually said "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." (v:63) He was talking about his words, but using a metaphor of eating and drinking to try to explain how he wants these words of his to become an essential part of people, even as food and drink becomes absorbed into our bodies and sustains us. And it is a complicated thing to explain and his followers did not find it easy to hear.

Apart from anything else, if you were only listening with half an ear – or even with three quarters – you could well think that Jesus was talking about cannibalism or something equally gruesome. It was not easy listening. It was not healing the sick and feeding the crowds. It was not sacking the Romans out of the country, or anything else that

seemed dramatic and exciting. Instead they were being asked to engage their brains, and for many people that is never as exciting as doing things or seeing them done.

What would it take for you to turn away? Many people, as we know do turn away either from the church or from faith in Jesus, though not always from both. There are many faithful Christians out there who have given up on church: recent research in the Highlands has shown that this is a far greater number than perhaps we had previously thought. There are also, though perhaps in smaller proportion, people who have lost their faith in Jesus who still are part of church fellowships, still come to worship. Obviously you who are here, while you might be in that second category are not in the first. What would it take for you to turn away?

Some people leave because of personal circumstances. When I arrived, aged 17 and fresh-faced, at university in Aberdeen, one of the first people I met was another first-year girl called Sarah. We never became best friends but we were friendly. As we got to know each other, we learned that each of us had lost her father a couple of years before. She once asked me how I could still believe when God had allowed this to happen to me – she never could. The difference was that in my grief I had turned to God for comfort, while in hers, Sarah had turned away. And hers is not an uncommon reaction when sad or bad things happen in our personal lives: to turn from God who has not kept everything good, nice and easy for us.

Another variation on this is people who have turned away from God because they see so much evil in the world and find it incompatible with the belief in a God of love. It is not that the evil is happening to them, but how could a God of love allow concentration camps, or nuclear bombs, or the genocide in Rwanda or the horrors that are happening in Syria? It is a good question. And in despair of finding an answer, people turn away.

For some people it is the behaviour of other Christians which turns them from faith. It can be the various sexual scandals with our press love to bring up, especially the behaviour of those who should be leaders and good examples in the church. The Roman Catholic Church in Scotland has this week had to do a lot more coming to terms with this with the publication of the MacClellan report, but it can happen in any church, any time and when it does it can, and perhaps should, turn people away whether they were the victims or not. When Christian people are seen to be no better than anyone else and worse than many, the world asks “What is the point of their faith, how can it be genuine if it doesn't make a difference?” And we should remember that – whether it is our sexual morality, or our greed, or our anger, or our honesty which could be called into question.

And then there is also the way that some Christian people, none here of course, but some Christian people can make others feel less worthy because of the way that they talk about their faith, their “super-spiritual” glow or smile. Christians are real people and when a Christian wears a plastic cover, we can all see that it is false.

And some people turn away because they feel intellectually unable to understand Christian teaching on some matters – on the doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps, or on just how Jesus' death saves us. And so we are back to those disciples who turned away when they found it hard to understand what Jesus was saying about his flesh and his blood, about his words and their power and importance. In fact I think we are more truly back than those disciples would have liked to acknowledge. People who turn away

from Jesus just because there is something difficult to understand presented to them are actually fairly rare. But people who use that as a reason to turn aside when all sorts of other things are going on in their minds, are more common.

I wonder if those members of that larger crowd of followers who turned away were not a little put out that they were not in the inner circle of the twelve. We know from the book of Acts, when a replacement for Judas was sought by the other eleven, that there were those in that group who had followed Jesus for just as long as the twelve had done.

There again, just before we picked up this story this morning, we see that Jesus' words had caused leaders among the Jews to dispute with him. Maybe some of these followers did not like to find themselves on the opposite side than their official leaders.

Over the summer weeks we have been mainly reading from Mark's gospel and from John, and it is a good thing to do both, because they give a balance to each other. If you only read Mark you could get the impression that Jesus' short ministry was spent rocketing around Palestine, healing, teaching in short, snappy parables, and generally being very exciting. If you read John you could get the impression that his ministry consisted of a few special signs interspersed with long, sometimes complex, discourses about what it meant. Of course, both were true. There was excitement, but, especially for those who followed more closely, there were times of profound teaching. Followers of Jesus who were drawn to him by the excitement of the things that Mark talks about might well find the more measured teaching and thoughtful discourses that John records less to their taste. People who came after him because they thought he was going to be a traditional Messiah, would be puzzled by the lack of rabble-rousing in his longer speeches.

And maybe that is why most people even today turn away from following Jesus. Not really because of one thing, but because of a few. Because of life circumstances and the behaviour of Christians, and the problem of evil and the difficulty of having to apply your mind and engage your patience in the quest for answers from God. When you put it this way, why are you still here?

Why are you still here? What is it that has kept you faithful to Christ and to his Church, despite every reason there might be to turn away. For me, my answer would be exactly like Peter's. (And incidentally, it is nice to see a gospel writer telling us that Peter got something right for a change!) When Jesus asked the twelve if they too were going to turn away, Peter said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter might not always have understood all of Jesus' words – we have seen that over and over again, and the other disciples were no better. And we may not always understand Jesus' words and ways either. But Peter out of the lengthy and difficult discourse Jesus had just given about being the true bread of heaven, Peter had understood one important thing: that the words Jesus spoke were the way to eternal life – full life, life that keeps on living and giving.

It was the most important thing he could have learned, and his response was the true one. When there are things that are hard – hard to understand, or hard to take, things to think about because they affect you or because they trouble you or because you have never thought that way before; when there are things that happen to you or in the world around you or in the church which disturb you, you will never get to the truth, you will never get the help you need to understand, or be strengthened by turning away. All

of you who have ever been through difficult times or thoughts or emotions – and that is pretty much everyone here – know that when you turned to God you found help. It was not always the help you thought you needed, not always a simple answer, but help was given you which you would not have found if you had used the difficulty as an excuse to walk away from God.

There will never be a time when following Jesus is easy and simple, not if we walk in the world with our eyes open. But there will also never be a time when turning from God will be the best answer to life's questions. May God grant that we determine to follow Jesus and bring to him our troubles, come what may. Amen.

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