

## **Sermon on John 6 56-69 220821**

Having fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus moves on to preach to his disciples [and would-be disciples] in the synagogue at Capernaum - probably mid-week [ie not the Sabbath] because his audience have evidently come to specifically hear him, Jesus. This is not nit-picking detail, by the way: the importance will become clear in a little while.

And, in the synagogue, he has announced that he is the Bread of Life – that those who would follow him must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

In doing so, he is quite deliberately challenging the then current Jewish belief that eating the flesh of a sacrifice was taking God into one's body, but that the blood must be allowed to drain away, because therein was life itself.

In short, Jesus is saying that he is God, and inferring that what he says is what God says – that he is the Word of God.

Thus commentators universally agree that this chapter is where John's Gospel is instigating the Church's ceremony of Holy Communion [John's Gospel has no record of the Last Supper].

So for bread and [later in this gospel] wine, read body and blood.

But then develop your thoughts further – as Jesus urges us here - to realise that body and blood is in turn a metaphor for spirit and life.

A new concept of an almost frightening complexity and with amazing implications for his listeners.

This, simply, is where John's Gospel is having Jesus claim that he is the Son of God – or if [like me] you prefer, the Word of God.

No wonder that many of his disciples say:  
“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

Jesus, detecting their discomfort [incredulity might not be too strong a word], offers them the possibility of another marvel: “What if you were to see the Son of Man [he means “me”] ascending to where he was before?”

And don’t take “ascending” too literally, either! The Hebrew word used is the same verb when Jesus and the disciples “went up” to Jerusalem.

So it’s figurative: not that that helps us much – how do you interpret Jesus’ eventual ascension to heaven?

My own view is that the Kingdom of Heaven is in us and around us – now and always. So God - Jesus, his Father, and the Holy Spirit - is in us and around us – now and always.

But don’t ask me how to get – to ascend - from where we are now into that eternal kingdom; if I knew, I wouldn’t be talking to you now!

And I believe that’s pretty much what Jesus meant, too – most of his audience wouldn’t be able to comprehend such an ascension even if they could experience it. His claim today to them is as much as they are ever likely to be able to take on board.

In explanation, Jesus goes on to say, in effect, that his Father knew that the members of his audience would come to listen to Jesus, but that many of them would just not be able to take that leap of faith to accept what Jesus was telling them.

To put it another way, there were, in that assembly, disciples and would-be disciples – the convinced and those who were anxious to be convinced; believers and agnostics, you might say.

But men and women of good intention and good will – happy to hear what Jesus has to say, happy to ponder over his claims.

But God knows that some can be convinced and others never will: “No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father”, says Jesus.

And, indeed, we are told that many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

Turned back, note. The phrase quite tellingly implies that they don't choose to accept this much and no farther – but that today's claims from Jesus, which they cannot take on board - mean that they **retreat** from the position of faith that they have occupied to date.

Perhaps they go off to look for someone else they can follow; perhaps they put their spiritual beliefs on hold; perhaps they decide that belief in spiritual matters is just not for them;

perhaps, one day, they might return to belief in Jesus.

Well, we don't need to go back 2000 years to understand their reactions.

Today, there are many for whom Christianity does not provide a sufficient answer: they search to see what other belief structures, what other religions, can offer.

There are many who see Jesus as a “great teacher” and [possibly] as a prophet. But leave it there, and don't - or won't - face up to the implications of Jesus as the Son – or Word - of God.

There are those [the majority of this country's population, if you believe the surveys] who believe in some sort of God, but don't – or won't – go looking for where he or she might be found.

There are those who think that there is no God, that it is all an historical invention by those humans who cannot bear to be alone.

And then there are those, who like those<sup>12</sup>, remain and to whom Jesus turns [with, I like to imagine, something approaching a resigned sigh]:

“Do you also wish to go away?”

Good old Peter – he gets it absolutely right:

“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.”

That'll do for me.

Amen.