

Sermon for Sunday 26.8.18

Today's gospel passage from John is described by theologian Richard Burridge as a "*Parting of the ways*". It is also seen by others as a story about the *sifting of the wheat from the chaff*.

For me, it is a wakeup call to keep alert as a follower of Christ. Throughout this chapter of John's gospel, and we have been involved in the storyline for several Sundays now, we have heard how, at the beginning of the chapter, Jesus and his teachings had been well received by his many followers – the crowds, it would seem, couldn't get enough of him.

They followed Jesus up the mountain, across the lake to Capernaum and were even perplexed and afraid when they thought that they had lost sight of him.

It is reasonable to assume, that these followers had witnessed or heard about Jesus' healings and miraculous signs, like the feeding of the multitudes, and walking on the water of the stormy seas of Lake Galilee.

They had probably heard him teach and maybe even been part of the debates.

His teachings, as the story tells us, had been rigorously clarified each step of the way. Jesus had held nothing back and perhaps, as Richard Burridge suggests, this is why it was so hard for some, to believe and accept – Jesus' clarity was stark, authoritative and uncompromising.

Things had been easy to accept when Jesus was healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, feeding the five thousand walking out to the disciples on the stormy seas – it was all very easy then.

The followers were simply the witnesses and some the recipients and few demands had been asked of them.

Then in the synagogue at Capernaum where he had been teaching - it all came to a head. Jesus' proclamation about his flesh being the living bread come down from heaven, and that those who eat of his flesh and drink his blood abided in him and he in them, had become too much to accept - offensive even - and many of his followers left and no longer walked with him. *This teaching is difficult, they said: who can accept it?*

All of a sudden the wide path that they had enjoyed being on with Jesus- had become much narrower.

Jesus' response to their complaining and murmurings was to add to what they already found offensive. *If you think what I have already taught is beyond belief and offensive, wait till you see the son of man ascending to heaven where he was before.*

And again he tells them that these truths can be accepted only by faith, which is God's gift to those who are open to it – it is not human achievement.

One commentary suggests that in this story Jesus is leading his many followers to shift from a faith in an all-powerful God who protects and defends his people by conventional means of the sword - and one who is admired, obeyed and feared –to a faith in a God whose emphasis is on spiritual transformation through personal indwelling –for in the bread of life Jesus is in us and we in him.

For Jesus, it became like the situation Joshua presents to the People of Israel, "decide today whom you will serve."

After many turn away from following him, Jesus tests the resolve of the twelve, asking them if they also wish to leave him. The disciples confess their loyalty. *Where else do we go*, says Peter. *We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy one of God.*

I believe it is fair to say that among the crowds who seek Jesus in any era, there will always be those who want to make him king on their own terms, those who murmur and complain; those who question or oppose him, followers who turn back or betray him, and those who realise that he is their only hope of life and receive his body and blood.

I guess this all leads us to the question: where do we stand in the crowd who seek Jesus?

Are we prepared to open our hearts to God in faith when the hard teachings about our own personal transformation hit home.

Can we make the shift from our old ingrained ways of judgement and control to the difficult teachings of Christ - to love your neighbour as yourself? To forgive one another 7 times 70. To pray without ceasing. To depend upon the Holy Spirit to accompany us and lead us into all truth? And to live in the assurance that the words that Jesus has spoken to us are spirit and life?

I think one response to this overall question, is to say that we are graced with many chances to live in this way – to make the shift.

Such is his faithfulness and love for us, Jesus teachings and his personal indwelling, remain with us, in and out of our faithfulness.

We are forgiven over and over again when we fall by the wayside – and in our acknowledgement and repentance things that were negative are turned into the positive opportunity to learn about ourselves and about our relationship with each other.

And in this positive side of falling, we are enabled to become more empathetic with our brothers and sisters in our faith community and in the wider community.

Isn't it the case that it is not until we experience something ourselves that we can glimpse or understand the suffering of others more deeply and with empathy.

I believe choosing the narrow road is never easy, even when we believe in faith that it is the one which leads to an everlasting happiness in Christ. And I believe from my life's experience, that it is the only path to be on, and that there is always help awaiting us on the path into oneness in Christ and even though sometimes we may feel that help is never coming it will always be offered in love and in the power of tenderness.

In the letter to the Ephesians today Paul, speaks about a spiritual battle between good and evil in the Christian life and for divine protection, we are to wear the armour of God. Truth, righteousness, salvation and the proclamation of the gospel.

Whichever way we understand our journey on the narrow path to oneness in Christ, one thing is certain – we cannot go it alone. Dependence upon God in prayer and thanksgiving, participation in Christian community and loving one another in all our woundedness even beyond our community, is always at the heart of our journey.

The Lord be with you.

