

*John 6: 56-69    Ephesians 6: 10-20*

What a month August has been so far ! There we were thinking we had problems with Covid, when suddenly we learn of the earthquake in Haiti and the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul. But how do we know what's actually happening in either country?

Where do we find the good news?

We are bombarded in the media with so many versions and interpretations of events, and conspiracy theories abound. Detailed supporting evidence, facts and plans are often replaced by opinions and intentions.. Who can we believe? Where do we look for leadership and how can we move forward with any confidence? Such questions regularly test our Christian faith.

Even Jesus, consistent in his message, with the welfare of others genuinely at heart in his exemplary earthly life, knew the pain of losing some of his disciples when doubts overtook their faith. In today's Gospel which, in John's account, comes after Jesus has been healing people and feeding the 5000, Jesus continues the theme of his being ' the bread of life' , in describing how faith in him nourishes our spiritual life, and promising that 'whoever eats this bread will live for ever'.

As Jesus had earlier said that 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them', some of his followers took these words literally, instead of realising they were spiritual and symbolic references. So, finding it difficult to understand the true meaning, many of them gave up on him.

In today's Gospel we find two different groups of people. There are those who find the teaching of Jesus too difficult to understand and demanding too much of them. They turn away and no longer go around with Jesus - and there are many who do this. The second group are those who remain loyal to him and stay with him.

Among these are his close disciples. Jesus asks them, "Do you also wish to go away?" They are not forced to stay; - and Judas, of course, will later prove that this is possible. For the moment, Peter replies for the disciples, and says, "Come on 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".

We, too, are given the opportunity to turn away or to commit ourselves to following Christ. And this is not just a one-off choice; we have to make it every day, and sometimes many times a day.

God doesn't force himself on us. He's given us the freedom to choose whether we serve Him or not. He gives himself to us in love, and we can choose to love Him in return, or to ignore Him. Some definitely choose to ignore, or even go against, God; others ignore him by default - that is, they let other things and other people squeeze God out of their lives. If we are to love and serve God, we have to be sure we have made this our own choice.

Faith in God gives meaning to life on earth, and hope of continuing joy when we die. Jesus said that faith is given to us by God, while St. Paul lists faith among the '*gifts of the Spirit*'. But faith does not necessarily bring certainty; in fact, to most people a life of faith is a struggle against nagging uncertainties.

Usually, resolution of our doubts consists of weighing up the probabilities, praying, and deciding to continue to follow the example Jesus set in his own earthly life. Even historically famous saints were troubled by doubts, but they were able to continue to serve God by talking through issues with him regularly in prayer.

In the Gospels we have confirmation that whatever Jesus promised, he carried out - throughout his earthly ministry Jesus was true to His word - even to that terrible death on the cross, followed by his resurrection. At every stage he kept in touch with his Father through prayer.

In our reading from Ephesians today, Paul tells us to stand fast by putting on the whole armour of God, including the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the Holy Spirit (which is the word of God), the helmet of salvation, and the shield of faith - and we are to pray in the Spirit at all times.

Again figurative language, but its shown to be valuable and accurate advice when we ourselves try to always tell the truth, to live according to Christ's example, spread the Word of God, and believe his promise of salvation.

If we do have and retain faith, give thanks, for its God's gift. If we experience periods of doubt, it isn't 'losing our faith'; its a sign that we need more of the 'bread that came from heaven' and more conversation with our Father, which enables us to come through seemingly catastrophic events, global and personal- our own 'cross', 'in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life.

God is constantly at work in creation and invites us take part in the work of change. 18 months ago, how many of us knew anything about *R-numbers* or what '*furlough*' meant? In the months ahead we will not be returning to the world we knew before the Coronavirus arrived. God is still in overall control and has seen us safely to this point; have we the faith to again go where he leads us, so our compassion and creativity can be put to good use in His service in the days ahead?