

Sermon for Ascension Brandon – Sunday August 16th - Pentecost 11 – John 6: 51-69 – S Edge

Have you ever played “Chinese Whispers?” You know, the party game in which someone begins a story and someone else whispers it to the next person and so on until the original gist of the story is lost in some hilarious misheard nonsense. Unfortunately in many ways life is just like a game of Chinese whispers. All our lives we are receiving information of one kind or another. From our families and friends, from the television, from the newspapers, in books, on line, information. My grandmother used to say, “don’t believe all you hear”, and grandfather would reply, “no, and not much of what you read either”. While that is an exaggeration, how much of the information that we receive every day of our lives can we trust? How much of it for example is slanted toward selling us something? Or getting us to support someone or something? Or getting us to respond in a particular way? I am not saying that this information is actually false you understand. Not that we are necessarily being lied to, but the truth can be told in many ways, and half-truth many more. We go through our lives carefully sifting the myriad of information we receive, can this be trusted? Can that be believed?

Then of course there is that other old saying about the truth hurting, when we do recognize the truth, it is not always pleasant, the truth can indeed hurt. The truth didn’t exactly hurt those in our Gospel reading this morning, but it certainly upset some of them. Jesus had just finished telling them that His Body was food indeed and His Blood was drink indeed, and that unless they were prepared to eat His flesh and drink His blood they had no life in them. They had said, “ This is a hard saying, who can hear it?” To the Jews with their taboos on blood this teaching was repugnant, and they were unable to follow Him anymore. We are told that after this, many no longer walked with Jesus but turned back. That phrase is of vital importance in the understanding of what happened to those who decided not to walk with Jesus anymore, and it is of vital importance in the understanding of what happens today to those who like these erstwhile disciples, decide that the teaching of Jesus is too hard. You see they turned “Back”. They didn’t just go home and carry on as before, because now, they had heard the teaching of Jesus. They didn’t just stagnate or remain static; they actually went backwards, because now what had in the past been forgivable as ignorance was unforgivable as rejection. It is one thing not to walk with Jesus because we have not heard His words and know no better. It is another thing entirely to not walk with Jesus because we have weighed His teaching in the balance and found it wanting.

Jesus then asked the twelve, “Will ye also go away?” As always it is Simon Peter who answers for the twelve, Simon Peter who asks the question that we sing every Sunday as part of our liturgy, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”

This question, although two thousand years old, is as fresh today as it was then, which I suppose is why our hymnal committee included it in our liturgy. It is a question that we need to keep before us at all times, because the answer to that question is a truth that we dare not forget.

In this world, there are those who feel that they have all the answers. You know the type, they are probably doing quite well in their career, nice home, and they think that they have got it made. They probably don't attend Church, or if they do they may show up for Midnight Mass at Christmas and again at Easter, after all they don't want to appear obsessive do they. They have got where they are by their own hard work and effort and they can't really see that there is anything missing from their lives for which they need God. And the tragedy of it is they are probably really terrific people, the sort of folk that you would be glad to have as friends, the sort of do anything for you, caring, loving people that the Christian is meant to be. And yet, although they probably wouldn't accept it, or indeed even realize it, there is something missing, there is something that they desperately need. Because not only do they not, as they mistakenly believe, have all the answers, they haven't even understood the question!

They certainly do not understand what it is that they need, and if we are honest, then we like Simon Peter probably do not fully understand the theological implications of what it is that we receive from Jesus, but we do know with the full assurance of faith that without Jesus we are incomplete. Remember, Jesus had just told the Jews that to have any life in them they must eat His flesh and drink His blood. Peter was a fisherman not a theologian and I am sure that he did not for a minute understand the precise meaning of Jesus words, and yet, He had seen such wonders and heard such teachings that he knew that whatever it all meant Jesus' words were the words of eternal life, and what was more, Jesus was the Holy one of God, and it is in this phrase, in the words of Simon Peter the fisherman, that all this confusion starts to make sense.

Even Jesus' enemies conceded that He was a good man, He was raised in the faith of Moses and Abraham, and He committed no sin. He taught the people, not rebellion, but submission to their enemies, love for those who persecuted them. But if that was all there were to Jesus' message, then He would be remembered as a kind of nineteen-sixties style prophet of universal love and peace. But there was more, much more, Simon Peter says Jesus has the words of eternal life, and that He is the Holy One of God. The Messiah.

He is the one that will fulfill the expectations of Israel, the one in whom Israel's hopes are realized. This is the one in whom the dawn of the new day has broken. All the prophets and seers of the Hebrew faith have looked to this one. This is the one described by the prophet Isaiah as being at once, servant and king, oppressed, broken and afflicted, yet triumphant crowned, victorious. This is what it is all about, it is not just the words themselves vital as they are, it is the

dynamic, the power behind the words. The power to make the words themselves into a reality so vibrant so vital that it really is only through those words that we have any life in us at all.

The twelve have realized that although this man standing there in their midst will no doubt turn their world on its head, that although they have no idea of the hows whys or wherefores, Jesus is the one, and life without Him, although perhaps easier to understand, perhaps in some ways less disturbing. would only be half a life. The same thing is true for us, it is true that we sometimes drift away from the teachings of Jesus, we have doubts, we are tempted and fall into sin. Sometimes we feel that we can manage very nicely thank you without God, but we can't. Without Jesus there really is nowhere for us to go.

For the Christian, life is never easy, being a Christian is about seeing ourselves in a way that the world does not. Your career is not important, your salary is not important, the house you live in and the car you drive are not important, these are the treasures on earth that Jesus told His followers not to worry about, Jesus words are not the words of the "good life", they are the words of eternal life. The Christian looks at himself and sees not his material success, but his spiritual need. He recognizes his sinful nature and the fact that there is nothing he can do about it. He recognizes that he is a sinner and that he is dead in his sin, and there is not a blind thing he can do about it. He can live a good life, keep the law, it will not help. He can stay faithful to his wife and resist all the temptations of the flesh. It will not help. He can burn himself up in the service of his fellow men doing works of charity and love. It will not help. None of these things can change his nature one iota. He was born a sinner, he will live all his life as a sinner and at the end, he will die as a sinner, as will you, and as will I. Painful as it may be, that is the reality. And yet the twelve, or at least eleven of them, recognized that this was not the whole story. Because they recognized that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the one that God had promised from the very beginning would come to save His people. The disciples trusted the promise of God and trusted the words of His Son. And this is the second part of the reality, for the Christian yes we will die as sinners, that is our nature and our nature cannot be changed, but the for Christian, the price of His sins has been paid and the forgiveness for them won on the cross by the Holy One of God dying to reconcile us to the Father. We are still sinners, but God no longer holds our sins against us, He doesn't even see them anymore, when He looks at us He sees only the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf and our sins are blotted out.

Jesus wants us to know with the full assurance of faith that we are forgiven, that we are free and that we are loved. This is the greatest power of the words that Simon Peter recognizes as the words of eternal life. They are words that not only forgive, but also constantly reassure us of our

forgiveness. They are words that not only save us in themselves because of He who speaks them, but they are words that continue to comfort us with the good news of our salvation.

Jesus also wants us to bring those same words of eternal life to others who have not yet heard them. They are not some kind of great cosmic secret, because we know that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, we know that, but some people may not, some may have heard but not understood some may have understood but not believed. They don't know to whom they should go. And we meet people like that every day of our lives, at work, among our neighbours and friends, among the other parents outside the school, in our increasingly secular society, there is no shortage of those who do not know to whom they should go and it is not someone else's responsibility to tell them, it is ours. Jesus did not establish His church to be a rest stop for the saved, but as the means of bringing salvation in His word and sacraments to the world, and we as members of that church have a responsibility to proclaim the words of eternal life whenever and wherever we can. We are not to be merely passive recipients of the Words of Eternal Life, but, as Jesus says at the end of His earthly ministry just before He Ascended into Heaven, we are to make disciples of all nations, teaching them all that He has commanded us. This is the purpose of the Gospel, this is the purpose of the Church, and for this purpose, The Holy One of God has called each and every one of us into His service.

Amen