

“ONLY YOU”
John 6:60-69

That little story we read just now from John’s account of Jesus’ life has always fascinated me. It shows that there were all sorts of responses to Jesus’ teaching. Not everyone took to Jesus positively, even those who seemed to be quite close to him. As we witness this morning three young people who are saying that they do want to follow Jesus’ example and live in the way he sets out, we might want to reflect on what our own response to him is.

Just to set this story in some kind of context, though, we need to go over what has already happened in the story of Jesus’ ministry before we get to this point. In the six chapters leading up to this incident, Jesus has been gradually growing in popularity with the ordinary people, leading up to the occasion in which he feeds five thousand people with just a couple of fish and five little rolls (*John 6:1-15*). As a result of that, the people try to make Jesus king, but he is having none of that.

Then, after the story of his walking on the water, there is a long section in which he refers to himself as “*The Bread of Life*”, with all the hints within that about his coming suffering and death, and the call for real commitment from anyone who wants to follow him. Now, we could say all kinds of things about that this morning, but just for a few moments I want us to focus on the reaction of those who were with him.

First of all, we need to establish who these “*disciples*” were. Probably most of us are used to thinking of the **twelve** disciples whom Jesus specifically called – Peter, James, John and all that lot. They were, if you like, his inner circle, his Cabinet. But we mustn’t forget that there was a much bigger group that followed him around too. In other places in the accounts of Jesus’ life the numbers 70 and 120 are mentioned – and there would have been many more who were prepared to follow him around for a short time as he passed through their town or region.

These people followed him for a variety of reasons. He was popular. He fed them. They liked his stories. They thought he might lead an uprising against the Romans. They were curious. Their friends were disciples. I suppose it’s a bit like us lot here today. We’re here for all kinds of reasons. Some of you come here every week. Some are here because it’s a special occasion. You may be curious. You may have come because one of your friends is being baptised. You may like the music, or the company, or the idea of being religious, but without getting too involved.

But then Jesus started going on about being the Bread of Life and being totally committed to him, about suffering and death and all that kind of thing. And some of the people who were there weren’t too keen on what they heard. Following Jesus was going to be no picnic (despite the way he’d fed the five thousand people). They didn’t like the idea of total commitment. They weren’t really able to understand what he was saying. And John tells us here that there were three main reactions.

1. THE GRUMBLERS (*vv60,61*)

Some of the people started moaning. (This may have been the day the church was born – it’s always been full of grumblers!) They couldn’t take what he had to say to them. If we had a bit more time this morning, we’d see that Jesus was claiming great things for himself. He’d just implied that he was greater than Moses, their greatest national hero (*v32*). And he was making great claims on his followers, too – they were to become totally identified with him (*vv50ff*), which would mean sharing his suffering and his death. That’s what the people being baptised are symbolically taking on today.

Now, once that dimension was added and the people saw that following Jesus was a bit more than just wandering around after him listening to his nice stories, they started to grumble. As one version of the Bible puts it: “*This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow*” (*The Message*). They wanted all the thrills and all the benefits Jesus offered them, but they weren’t prepared for the hassles.

Many years ago, when I was at University, I used to wile away my evenings as a bouncer at concerts and discos. The band and their roadies would have been hard at work all day, setting up equipment and rehearsing for the evening's concert, and then, just before they were due to start, all the hangers-on and groupies would turn up, wanting to persuade us that they were part of the band's entourage, wanting the kudos without the hard graft involved. In a sense these grumbling disciples were like that – spiritual groupies.

The teaching of Jesus calls for total commitment and total dependence on him. Maybe you're one of the people who likes to think in a vague sort of way that you're Christian. You fancy the benefits and the good things that Jesus undoubtedly has to offer, both now and for eternity, but you start moaning and grumbling every time the teaching of Jesus seems to asking something of you. Even if no-one else really knows what you're thinking about him, because you tend to keep your complaints to yourself, Jesus knows: just as he was aware of the thoughts of those disciples, he knows what's going on in your heart too.

2. **SOME GAVE UP AND LEFT** (vv66)

Jesus tried to explain further and was well aware that some of his listeners were offended. That never stopped Jesus when he was telling the truth. He could see that there were some things that were particularly difficult for them to accept and he emphasised them. After all, anyone who was really going to follow him needed to be aware of what it entailed (which is why we've spent some time with these three people talking about what being a Christian is really all about). What he said was that reliance on our own abilities and ideas is not good enough. Yes, we need to show our commitment, but it is God who is right at the centre of everything. "*Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen,*" he says (*The Message*), and referring back to their desire to make him an earthly king, a political ruler, he points out that it's the Holy Spirit who makes all the difference – not status or money or property or education: none of the things that our culture tells us are so important.

Then, the killer punch for many of them – "*You get to me only as a gift from the Father*". Being a real disciple means that we have to hand ourselves over completely to God – the symbolism of total immersion in baptism. It doesn't matter who you or what you own or how popular you are with your friends. It's all about recognising that God's in charge. And in a society such as ours, where self-sufficiency and individual enterprise are such prized qualities, we don't like to think that we're not in charge of our own destiny.

These disciples couldn't take it. So they left. They wanted no more to do with Jesus, this man whose indiscriminate love and grace brought everyone up to the same level. And when we find our ego, our self, our arrogance has to take a back seat, we give up too. The sacrifice is too great for many people. Jesus knew who would leave him, of course, but he was saddened by it nonetheless. Maybe you are like those disciples – someone who has to be in control all the time, someone who thinks they're self-sufficient (the "You-don't-have-to-go-to-church-every-week-to-be-a-Christian" type), someone who can't completely surrender to God, to "*the Spirit who gives life*". If you can't, well you might as well walk away from Jesus completely.

3. **SOME BELIEVED** (vv68,69)

Jesus turns to Peter and the others who seem to be closest to him and asks them if they're off too. I can remember when I was in charge of a football team at college and had to try and get a full team for an away game at some distance from college. Very often the players were reluctant to commit themselves,

even the ones who were usually the most faithful and talented. “*Are you going to leave me, too?*” he asked, with a note of sadness in his voice, I imagine.

And then Peter, as so often, speaks out, taking the responsibility for speaking for them all: “*Master, to whom would we go?*” Jesus had made them an offer they couldn’t refuse. Basically, there’s no alternative, no other option. And still there’s no better option open to us. But it’s not a grudging “best of a bad job”, nor “the lesser of two evils”. Peter says, “*Only you have the words of real life, eternal life*”. The things Jesus said – about himself, about the world, about us – they’re the only way to ensure a full life now and eternal life when this bit’s over. That’s what these girls are really saying this morning in their baptism – there’s no other option that really makes sense. And if you take part of it, you’ve got to take it all: the love, the peace, the joy, the promises – **and** the suffering, the commitment, the blood and gore of the cross.

And there’s a really positive note to Peter’ final words – “*We **believe** and **know** that you are the Holy One of God.*” He believed it in his head and knew it in his heart that Jesus really is the business. These girls here this morning are not stupid – they’ve thought about this and they’re old enough and intelligent enough (believe it or not!) to weigh up the options. It makes sense to them that Jesus is the one to follow. But they’ve also experienced it: it has made a difference to them and they want to let other people know. This isn’t an easy thing they’re doing this morning – and living as follower of Jesus isn’t always easy. But in the long run, it’s the only way.

You might be a grumbler. You might be someone who believes totally in the sovereignty of the individual, you are in charge of your own destiny and no-one’s going to take that from you. You might not even have a clue what this is really all about, but you’d like to find out a bit more. Well, this morning you can reach out for Jesus and take up his offer. His “*words of real life, eternal life*” are really the ultimate “Offer you can’t refuse”. And the contract on that offer is sealed with Jesus’ own blood. What is your response? If you’d like to find out more, have a word with me afterwards.