

26.08.2018
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Introduction

Open conflict meets Jesus head on in this text, a combination of the desertion of many who had followed him and the betrayal he was beginning to see was to come from one in his closest circle of disciples. Jesus response is to constantly point to life, life everlasting and not to be drawn away by the lure of trying to have more disciples or keep his team together.

As you read through the text think about the contrasts between the real-life Jesus and his group of followers and our modern churches tied to buildings and ministering to settled communities. He has much to say about the ancestors, and it isn't all good.

Reading the text, think about relationships between past and current theologies and traditions. Take note of the places where there is conflict, and where there is agreement.

Text

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “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.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Comment

When many of the disciples heard Jesus' teaching on the bread of life, they found it 'difficult' in our translation, but the Greek word is *σκληρός*, which might be better translated as 'hard', it is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 23:24 for the hard man who reaped where he did not sow. In modern English we would probably say, 'harsh', as the best translation. It is a word that has a tinge of unfairness, Jesus told them that the ancestors died, after eating the manna, the bread from heaven, and that if they ate the bread Jesus offered they would live forever. The disciples replied, "That's harsh, who can take that?"

As the generations turn each often finds fault with the one before. The Victorians now seem imperialist and atavistic to us; the widely accepted prejudice, racism and sexism of the early twentieth century seems abhorrent today; and the use of the world's resources by the children of the mid-twentieth century appears to us, in 2018, to be reckless to the point of disastrous. Our criticism of our forebears can seem harsh indeed. Yet campaigners have found that when a campaign is formulated in negative language, while it can gain votes in the short term it does not buy us long-term change or achieve long-term goals.

For Jesus, spelling out where the ancestors had gone wrong lost him disciples. If he were in a modern church other members might complain that he 'couldn't' say that because people might leave. Instead, he lets them go. He was trying to make a point about spirit and life, not about actual eating, 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.' The remaining disciples, who do get the point, and can live with it, are asked if they too would like to leave. Rather than begging people to stay with him, Jesus would prefer that people leave if they weren't clear about what he was saying. Simon Peter gets the point, and answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

The juxtaposition then is not between harsh and kind but rather between life on the one side, and death on the other. Here is a very difficult moral question, when is it better to be harsh and right than to be kind and wrong? When do we keep the church together at all costs, and when do we break with traditions or traditional view-points because we now see them to be wrong?

For some of us, the unity of a particular church might be more important than the choices of ethical questions within that community. For some of us the integrity of following scripture and accurately reflecting the values of the society in which Jesus lived might be the top concern. For others, the pressing needs of equality, justice, environmental action and interpersonal respect, including all genders and life stances, might be what takes top priority in their understanding of faith.

For any of these Christians these priorities may genuinely become more important than the unity of the church itself, or more important than membership of a particular church or denomination. There are times when our judgements of our forebears are harsh and we may indeed choose to leave. In this, we are no more than following our saviour, but only if the new answer leads to life. If we are harsh and wrong, then this will be death, if we are kind and right, this leads to life. Jesus found a moment in his ministry when it was right for him to be harsh, and to watch followers walk away. It can't have been easy. When and how we speak out on the ethical matters that mean something to us, is a crucial judgement, and it is one every Christian in the modern church faces.

Response

Take time to reflect on the ethical issues which would lead you personally to see

disciples from your community walk away. Think about how that would feel? How sure would you need to be to make that decision? Have you been part of a church that split? What was that experience like? Did you find it easy or difficult to ascribe or apportion blame in that situation?

OR

Consider William Wilberforce, Elizabeth Gaskell, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They all used their writing, their lives and their voices in different ways to stand up for right. Wilberforce in combating slavery, Gaskell in using her writing to combat poverty and improve women's rights, Bonhoeffer in rejecting the church's collusion with national socialism in Germany. There are many other examples. Do you think these people are different from normal people? Or is it just that they were faced with a wrong and felt there was a need to be harsh, hard, difficult, in order to right that wrong?

Prayer

The choice is not between harsh and kind but rather between life on the one side, and death on the other:

Lord of the hard word, the brave stand, the righteous voice,

Who allowed disciples to leave, traitors to betray, and right to prevail

Who criticised the ancestors, and turned over the tables,

Grant to us the same courage to follow your will

Seeing what is true and rejecting what seems soft or easy

Living what is life itself

And walking away from the soft death of collusion,

In Jesus Christ, our harsh, loving lord,

Amen
