

Sermon – Proper 16 – St Alban the Martyr, St Albans

John 6: 58-69

A profound shift is underway in how nations of the world are selecting their leaders. Nationalism seems to be on the rise and the tough-person leader with authoritarian tendencies seems to be the flavor of the month. This shift in national leadership is taking place predominately because of the perceived threat of migrants and refugees. It does seem these leaders are being elected as saviors of sorts.

For those of you that might follow international news you may have read that the governing political party in my homeland Australia has just changed leaders again. Changing leaders in a Westminster parliamentary system is not unusual during a term but it is unusual to change leaders because their poll numbers drop and contenders jostle for position believing only they can save the party.

A challenger has cast out the Prime Minister of Australia six times in the past 10 years. None of them has governed for a full term. It seems too that the electorate is fickle choosing to support a leader only if they deliver what they want and abandoning them when they don't get what they desire. It can be challenging to stick with a leader even when the times get tough.

No doubt we will measure the success of a leader in how well we have been looked after. We will look for tangible ways in which we are better off. I wonder though if we will judge our leaders in terms of whether they made our community fairer and more just.

If we go back to the first century the people of those days were also seeking to find a leader that ultimately would make their lives better. A few weeks ago the gospel reading was the first section of the Sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to John where the crowd following Jesus is miraculously fed with bread and fish.

If you recall after the feeding, the crowd closed in on him, wanting to make him king. The crowd felt that Jesus was a prophetic man that should be their king, someone who would make their lives better. But Jesus was having none of it and went away to pray.

As humans we are never really satisfied. We grumble and moan about the state of the world and our own circumstances, and indeed about the church. Indeed this condition of ours is not new. Moses experienced his people grumbling and they ended up demanding an idol to worship, something tangible. The same thing happened when they eventually settled in the Promised Land. After a time the judges were not enough and they demanded a king. They wanted a divine earthly monarch like the other kingdoms because like us all we want someone who we can see and maybe touch.

The events of the day after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand are important for us as a church to consider. In these passages from Chapter 6, Jesus illustrates by his metaphor of bread and drink that he is portraying a pivot point in human history. I say a pivot point because of transformational nature of Jesus' teaching about him self, first as the bread of life that nourishes and finally as the spirit of God that gives life to the world eternal life. He invites the crowd on a journey of personal and spiritual transformation.

Jesus invites those that are intrigued by his message and miraculous feats to join him in acknowledging that true life comes from the spirit of God. Those that follow him will form a new community of faith, be transformed from the violent sacrifices that were demanded as a price of worshipping God, and live in a community of peace and welcoming of the other, fed by the spirit of God. Jesus only asked that they 'eat' him or nourish themselves on his word.

After following Jesus and listening to his teaching the crowd found his teaching hard to understand. "How can we eat your flesh" they wondered aloud. So now they are troubled. Jesus though never demands the disciples do one thing over another. He invites them to reflect and asks, "Does this offend you?" What if I were to give you proof of my divinity, if you saw me ascend from whence I came.

If the witnesses stayed they could have been transformed through the spirit of faith. But the majority decided to leave because they found it hard to comprehend his teachings, even after the revelation of Jesus' miraculous acts the day before. Only the twelve apostles stay, with Peter confessing that Jesus has the "words of eternal life" and they have come to "believe and know that [he is] the Holy One of God."

Stanley Hauerwas, a contemporary theologian paints a picture of the new life that Jesus invites us into: "Jesus gave [his followers] a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence—by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money—by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership—by drawing on the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society—by building a new order, not making the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person. He gave them a new attitude toward the state and toward the "enemy nation."

We too might find a lot of what Jesus says hard to understand. Faith in Jesus is hard. When we find it hard we can choose to walk away as well. Many do. In walking away though we make the decision to forgo understanding the meaning behind Jesus teaching and to remain in ignorance of his message, maybe forever.

The power of this gospel passage I believe is the invitation to stay with Jesus despite misgivings and uncertainty. The courageous few that stay are invited into a new Eucharistic community centered on the cross and on the body and blood of Jesus. It is this new community, based on the precept of divine truth, rather than the violence of the old ways, that will provide the structure for their spiritual life.

Hauerwas says of the new politics of divine truth, "The truth, of course, is that the Father has sent his Son so that we—that is, the church—might be an alternative politics, a politics of truth, to that of the world. The world's politics is based on violence, believed necessary given the absence of truth. It is kill or be killed. That is the politics that has been overwhelmed in Christ's death and resurrection. A people have been created through the work of the Spirit to be an alternative politics to the politics of the lie—lies so blatant that we believe they must be true as otherwise they are so absurd—lies that

lead us to believe that “peace” can be achieved through war.”

We are here today because those early disciples stayed and listened, and worked through their difficulties to provide for us a model of faith and courage.

So today and every day as we confront the challenges of life in our communities, Jesus continues to ask us the same question, “Does this offend you?” Does the word of God offend us? How do we reflect on this question? Jesus provides the assurance and tells us, that “It is the spirit that gives life: the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken are spirit and life”.

“Do you wish to go away?” Jesus says to the remaining twelve. “To whom shall we go” Peter says. And I say today as well. “To whom shall we go?” Despite the difficulties of life, the challenges of being transformed by faith in Jesus, and the desire we have for tangible answers to our questions, we stay and we form and strengthen our Eucharistic community. The alternative is to live apart from God and be tossed and blown about by the uncertainties of a violent world.

When our national political leaders crumble and fall, replaced by similarly fallen humans, we know that in the community of faith Jesus Christ stands strong and will not be supplanted by worldly political power plays and corruption. When we stay and follow Jesus we experience the spirit working through each of us together to lift the down trodden, to heal the broken-hearted, to comfort those in pain and to feed the sheep.

So when you feel defeated and weakened in your life remember this passage from John. Create some space in your life for the spirit of Jesus to fill you and surround you. Stay. Pray. Come together and share in Jesus body and blood. By doing so you will find peace, stillness and an experience of the spirit at work in each other.

This is where we need to be, deep in the heart and spirit of our Lord, for this is where the spirit of God will speak to us.

Amen