

Scripture for Sunday August 19 2018

John 3:16-19

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

John 6:35-51

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. ³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

⁴¹ At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" ⁴³ "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. ⁴⁴ "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. ⁴⁶ No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Seeing and Believing

We live in strange times in which certain notable politicians are cavalier with the “truth” and promote “alternative facts.” A feature of what has been called a “post-truth” culture is that “those with power define what is true”! That being the case, truth is effectively *privatised* and the notion of *public* “truth” itself comes under threat. Reality becomes warped to suit the whims of the powerful. I suspect that is not unlike how Caesar viewed the Roman world of Jesus’ day. Speaking “truth to power,” then, is tough in any age and those who do so act like biblical prophets. Jesus followed in that prophetic tradition and what he had to say was *not* intended as a privatised religious message but something that was public truth – valid for everyone. And in so doing you can bet his message provokes a reaction - then and now.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus declares, “*I am* the bread of life. Whoever *comes* to me will never go hungry, and whoever *believes* in me will never be thirsty.”¹ This is a provocative statement and it was recognised as such by his audience, even if it is somewhat puzzling for us today. I introduced this topic two weeks ago² and the Lectionary continues with this important theme as we explore the implications and reactions to this bold claim. Remember, the “bread of life” mentioned here is in the context of the earlier miraculous feeding of the 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish,³ and it also echoes God’s provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness in the days of Moses.⁴ John’s gospel states that Jesus *himself* is the divine gift from heaven, he is the bread who fills our hunger for authenticity, meaning, and purpose to life itself. Now that’s quite a claim, one that we are free to accept or reject. So, is it true? That is, of course, the *Christian* proclamation – and I passionately believe it to be so! We, however, want to be in control of our own destiny’s, master of our own soul’s; we even want to define what is true! Consequently, the call to “come” and to “believe” in to someone else is uncomfortable and goes against our inclinations. We would rather believe in ourselves! This claim of Jesus is, then, strongly counter-cultural and, hence, unpopular. But what if it is true? Let’s hear Jesus out.

He goes on to say, “But as I have told you, you have *seen* me and still you do *not* believe.”⁵ One of John’s emphases is that “seeing” is closely connected with “believing.” In John 4:48 Jesus, perhaps somewhat critically, says: “unless you [all, *plural*] see the (miraculous) signs and wonder you will not believe.”⁶ This “seeing” is not then just a question of an optical sense experience,⁷ of witnessing something before our very eyes, but of *understanding* the significance of the *sign*. In this context, it is *recognising* who Jesus *is* and what God is doing through him. Jesus is rephending his questioners here as those “who *have* seen him and *still* do not believe.”

¹ John 6:35.

² See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/I-am-the-Bread-of-Life.pdf>

³ John 6:1-15.

⁴ Exod 16:2-3, 9-15.

⁵ John 6:36. See also John 3:18; 5:36-38. Of course, in order to see you have to first “come” to Jesus (John 6:35), even if that coming to Jesus is secretly, by night, as in the case of Nicodemus (John 3:2)

⁶ The conversation that follows is important too: John 4:49-54. (On *hearing* the man *believed*, v50b). See also John 6:30; John 20:25,29.

⁷ Incidentally, the healing of the blind man in John 9 is not just a miraculous sign, but a metaphor of restoring true *sight*.

Arguably the main reason they could *not* see Jesus as the Messiah was because he was not doing the kind of things they expected God's Chosen One to do. They wanted a God of *power* who would fulfill their own political ambitions, not a God of *grace*, and they expected God's Chosen Representative to dance to their tune. When we have predetermined ideas about how *we* think God *should* behave, we are often blinded to what God is *actually* doing among us. Many today, *think* they want God to do unequivocal, dramatic things in order to "prove" he exists. But faith cannot be compelled as that would eliminate freewill and destroy the very meaning of the word "faith." You can't coerce faith just like you can't compel love. Faith itself is a gift from God,⁸ one that we need to nurture. And such trust begins by being open to the possibility that God has revealed himself uniquely in the person and life of Jesus.⁹

Jesus then continues, saying, "All those the Father gives me will come to me, and *whoever* comes to me I will never drive away."¹⁰ This is a complex saying and warrants a little unpacking. First, remember the context; Jesus has just fed the 5000 in the wilderness. All those people who *came to Jesus* then were not driven away to get their own food; God miraculously provided for their physical need through the five loaves and two fish. Moreover, everyone was able to eat to the *full*, after which John writes, "When they were *satisfied* he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left-over *so that nothing may be lost.*'"¹¹ And we are told that they were 12 baskets left over - symbolically enough for *all* of the 12 tribes of Israel if they would but also seek Jesus. Second, the phrase "All those who the Father gives me" need not be seen as *exclusive* to the Jews. Earlier in John 3:16, we read, that God "so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son so that *everyone* who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This *inclusivity* is reiterated in our reading today - see John 6:40. The point is clear: It is God desire that *all people* will come to Jesus and whoever comes to him will never be driven away!

Sadly, the Church has often put barriers – even walls - between people and Jesus. In the past this has been incorporated into the Latin liturgy which few could understand, or with a Church architecture that contains screens or barriers to distinguish between people of different status and their distance to the Holy Communion elements. Theologically, there have been barriers to those of different colour and ethnicity, and in our own days there is a barrier for those of the LGBTQ community. Moreover, a tragic effect of the deplorable and shameful abuse perpetrated by the church, whether sexual or the gross mistreatment of indigenous peoples, is that it creates a personal obstacle between the victims and God. The church must not just repent and reform, but be publicly accountable to society if those walls to trust and faith are to begin to come down. However, the bottom line is this: Jesus does not want *anyone* to be driven away, if they earnestly come to him and believe in him as the One sent by God. However, there is a delicate balance here between God's initiative and our response; *both* are important. Jesus has made God's will visible and accessible to all humankind. Faith in Jesus is impossible without God love for the world, but human beings retain responsibility for the decisions we make in response to

⁸ Eph 2:8-9.

⁹ When we have preconceived ideas (from, say, philosophy) about God's character or nature we are prone to dismiss the possibility that God has *revealed* himself to humanity in some way.

¹⁰ John 6:37.

¹¹ John 3:12.

God's grace.¹² And that decision is expressed here in terms of either "seeing" and *not* believing (v37), or of seeing *and* believing (v40).

John tells us that Jesus continues, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but do the will of him who sent me."¹³ And what is that? Not to lose any who God has given him, but to raise them up on the last day. That last point is repeated: everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and will be raised up on the last day.¹⁴ Again, this is dense, controversial, bold, and disturbing. John emphasizes that Jesus came from God and Jesus makes it clear that he had a special relationship with God the Father. And John uses the confusing term "eternal life" and makes repeated reference to being "raised up on the last day." What does all this mean? John begins to unpack this in the following versus through the *grumbings* the Jews.¹⁵ They don't like what they are hearing either!

Before going on, it is worth commenting on the word "grumbling" because the same Greek word is used in the Greek Old Testament [LXX] with reference to the Israelites grumbling and complaining in the wilderness to Moses.¹⁶ In other words, there is a connection between those in Jesus' audience who do not recognise what God is doing through Jesus and the moaning of the Israelites during the exodus. The point being this: What happened to those in the wilderness who didn't believe then? Ultimately, they died in the wilderness and they never entered the Promised Land.¹⁷ Some rabbis at the time believed that those ancestors who died not only missed out on the Promised Land, but also missed out on the life to come. Again, there is an implied judgment here and Jesus tells them to "stop grumbling."¹⁸ But Jesus also says it doesn't need to be that way if you believe in me as "the living bread – or manna – that came down from heaven."¹⁹

Consequently, those who "grumbled" were, in John's eyes, those who had seen Jesus but was still *determined* not to believe.²⁰ And what was their complaint? They were stuck on the *humanity* of Jesus, as many are today, claiming: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph's father and mother we know?"²¹ How can he say that he came *down* from heaven?" From John's account, Jesus seems not to respond directly but again reiterates his own theological agenda. He adds, "it is written in the prophets: "they will all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father."²² Even more disturbing words! Appealing to the prophets, in this case Isaiah 54:13, may have had some effect. However, for many of us today, an appeal to an obscure verse in Scripture for authority seems a little desperate and

¹² See John 1:11-13; 3:13-21.

¹³ John 6:38.

¹⁴ John 3:39-40.

¹⁵ i.e., John 6:41-51.

¹⁶ See, for example: Exod 15:24; 16:2-3; 17:1-4; Num 14:1-4.

¹⁷ John 6:49-50. This explicit connection to 'fate' of the unfaithful Israelites in the wilderness cannot be brushed aside here.

¹⁸ John 6:43.

¹⁹ John 6:35,39-40,51. The connection with *manna* from heaven is again evident.

²⁰ "The Jews" is how John typically refers to this group. However, this should not be seen in an anti-Semitic way; rather, this reflects the tensions in John's day – at least generation later - between Jewish Christians, Jews, and access the synagogues.

²¹ John 6:42; see also John 1:11;14,18; 3:13-15. Remember too that John has no infancy narratives as do Matthew and Luke.

²² John 6:44-45. See also John 1:14,18; 3:31-36.

is perhaps indicative of megalomania! We have even heard of American politicians and law makers appeal to the odd Bible verse to prove their claim, but it usually backfires! In Jesus day, however, the Jews accepted the authority of the Old Testament and so perhaps Jesus was pointing to messianic texts that indicated to the *nature* of Messiah.²³ “Open your eyes,” Jesus is saying, “See and believe”!

Moving on: as mentioned earlier, John reports Jesus as saying: “All who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”²⁴ The “last day” is a reference to the final Judgement Day, which is perhaps better understood as “Justice Day” when all that is wrong in the world is finally redressed. In other words, this is *good* news and not a day to fear for those who “see and believe” in the Son. But that good news gets even better! Jesus then says, “Very truly I tell you, the one who believes *has* eternal life.”²⁵ Now “very truly I tell you” is a characteristic phrase in the gospels and adds special emphasis to what immediately follows. Indeed, this way of speaking was *untypical* of rabbis, yet the gospel writers specifically associate it with Jesus, no doubt it was a part of the remembered oral tradition. But what is the point Jesus is stressing? Everyone who believes in the son *has* “eternal life,” *here and now*, without waiting for that “last day”!²⁶

So often Christians equate “eternal life,” with “life *after* death.” But “eternal life” refers to a *quality* of life, an *abundant* life, a *fulfilled, purposeful* life, one that shares the inner life of Jesus, and it is on offer to anyone who believes. This “eternal” life is both for *now and for the future*, and so, yes, it does go on after death. That life in the “age to come,” the life that the risen Jesus has *now* as the first fruit of the final harvest, is ultimately a *not* that of a disembodied spirit that so many people think about with life after death. It involves a transformed physicality, as the resurrection body of Jesus demonstrated. But the key thing is this “eternal life” begins in the *present* when someone believes. This means we can live *without fear* because God is with us *now and forever*, whatever transpires in our lives.

Jesus concludes with this summary, “I am the living bread who came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world.”²⁷ Those present questioned how can this locally-known Jesus could have “come down from heaven”? And Jesus responds by emphasising his flesh, his physicality, and that he himself is the true life-giving manna from heaven. See the signs and believe!

If we are honest, we struggle with such sayings; John knew that too! It is only his gospel that presents the post-resurrection story of doubting Thomas;²⁸ which effectively reiterates this “see and believe” theme. And there Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have *not* seen and *yet* have come to believe.”²⁹ And John concludes his gospel with a statement of the book’s purpose; he writes: “Now Jesus did many

²³ See also Jer 31:33-34. The reference to Isaiah 54:13 is embedded in messianic oracles that relate the *kind* of Messiah God will raise (e.g., a suffering servant – 52:13-53:12) together with a description of the abundant life (Isa 55).

²⁴ John 3:39-40.

²⁵ John 6:47.

²⁶ See also John 5:24-29.

²⁷ John 6:51. It seems to me that John is embracing an “enfleshed divine,” so providing the seeds for a future *trinitarian* God.

²⁸ John 20:24-29.

²⁹ John 20:29.

other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may *come to believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that *through believing* you may have *life* in his name.”³⁰

We are left with the question on the minds of those Jews at Capernaum: Who *is* this Jesus? His public deeds force a response, because John says they are *signs*. Yet what he says was disturbing then and many find it so today. When we reflect on texts like this – and John clearly makes a big deal of this particular saying – we wonder, “Is Jesus a truly a wise man, a good teacher, or is he crazy or deluded?” Or is he a false prophet peddling fake news?³¹ Is Jesus who he says he is, or not? If so, these claims of Jesus define a *new* reality! And that itself is another reason some struggle to come to Jesus. Obviously, John wants us to see and believe!

Another stumbling block today is the question, “What about those of other faiths?” John is *not* addressing that important issue here; this discussion here is in the context of the Jewish faith. But I don’t believe this need be a barrier! Earlier in John 3:8, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “The wind – or God’s Spirit - blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” God’s unpredictable Spirit always goes ahead to Christ’s message, creating a receptive hearts and minds to “see and believe” that good news, and we should expect that to be expressed in non-conventional ways in non-Jewish cultures. It is God’s Spirit who gives *life*, not you or me – that is a prerogative of God’s grace and initiative.³² Moreover, in the context of Jesus being the Good Shepherd in John 10, he says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”³³ This also reflects the *inclusivity* of Christ’s mission, rather than narrow exclusivity. So let us not trip over the hurdle of “other religions” or make it an excuse for our own response. Jesus is the Saviour *of the world*, and the consequences of the life, death, and resurrection reach much wider than many conservative Christians think!³⁴ The Good Shepherd knows who are his sheep,³⁵ whatever community or tradition they belong to, and I suggest that perhaps we should be content to leave it at that!

However, we are part of a *Christian* community and if the Spirit is prompting us here and now, how will we respond? Will we grumble? Will we see and refuse to believe? Or will we *see and believe*, and come and feast on the bread of life? With the writer of the fourth gospel, I hope it is the latter. Amen.

³⁰ John 20:30-31. See also John 21:24-25.

³¹ This issue of Jesus leading the people astray certainly came up at his later trial; see John 18:14.

³² See C. H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1992).

³³ John 10:16; see also John 10:9.

³⁴ See also Rom 2:14-15; Matt 7:17,21; Luke 13:23,29-30. C S Lewis explores this theme creatively in his Narnian adventure, *The Last Battle*. Emeth has been faithfully serving the god Tash, rather than Aslan, all his life. Once dead he meets Aslan who welcomes him home. (In the plot-line Lewis also rejects the amalgamation of faith traditions - those who would propose to worship “Tashlan.”)

³⁵ John 10:14. In Paul’s terminology, Jesus knows those who are “in-Christ” (e.g., Gal 3:26-28).