

Sermon for 25th August 2024, Year B, Proper 16

Preached at St Serf's, Shettleston

John 6:56-69

Sermon by the Revd Jane Horton

Do you ... ever have arguments with God?

... feel like answering back? Grumbling? Complaining?

Do you ... struggle to accept some of the things "He" seems to be saying or that other people tell you He's saying?

Do you want to disagree with Him? Doubt Him?

Do you ... sometimes just stop talking to Him?

I must admit there are certainly times when I do.

All of those things.

It can be for all sorts of different reasons:

- the things I'm wrestling with in my own life or in the lives of those I love
- the unfairness of life generally
- my sense of sorrow and outrage at so much of what's going on in our society and the wider world

It can also be about:

- the way in which my understanding of the Bible and theology have radically changed over the four decades plus since I became a Christian and my struggles with prayer and discipleship
- the many imperfections of the Church, both as an institution and in its local incarnations
- the unloving and ungodly way in which Christians can disagree with and treat other Christians

You get the picture. I could go on! And I wouldn't be surprised if you also might identify with some of these same things and more ...

In fact perhaps, like me, there can even be times when you find all this Christian faith and discipleship lark so difficult, such grindingly hard work – that you almost feel like giving up and walking away ...

Almost ...

Yet you don't.

You haven't.

We haven't! We're all still here this morning – despite our continuing struggles and our periodic outbursts of rage at God – “Just what the **** do you think you're playing at???” (God can take it by the way! Just look at the Psalms!)

Yes, we're all still here today, even if it's simply habit.

But perhaps it's more than that ...perhaps somewhere deep within the heart of us, there's something that keeps drawing us ... someone ...

Maybe we can imagine ourselves here at St Serf's as part of the gathered congregation in our Gospel reading this morning, the crowds of Jesus' followers in the synagogue at Capernaum – who finally get sick of hearing the preacher talking about bread!

Or more precisely, the majority of these disciples – presumably not just those present in the actual building on the day, but many of those who heard about it via word of mouth later – have had their religious sensibilities so offended by what Jesus has been saying that, many [of them] turned back and no longer went about with him.

I wonder how that experience of abandonment felt for Jesus from a human point of view ...

There is clearly a sense in the gospels that throughout his ministry Jesus expects and regularly experiences this kind of rejection of his message and of who he is.

But until this point, opposition from the Jewish religious authorities and from many within his own local community had previously gone hand in hand with adoring acclaim from the crowds.

Now they too are turning their backs on Jesus – a foretaste of what is to come during Holy Week, when almost all his closest friends will abandon him.

Indeed, the gospel writer, John, indicates in our passage this morning that Jesus already knows which one of his inner circle is going to betray him.

Yet knowing this, Jesus still loves Judas, continues to journey alongside and break bread with him and will ultimately stoop to wash his feet before the Last Supper in that final, intimate act of service that is both a cleansing and a symbol of forgiveness ...

Simon Peter's feet also, of course.

And Peter – the one who will loudly protest that he will never forsake Jesus – will later enact his own personal betrayal and abandonment of his master, when he denies knowing Jesus in the courtyard of the High Priest that very same night.

But all that is to come ...

Let's return again to this morning's reading and imagine Jesus becoming aware that the crowds who've up till now hung on his every word and shadowed his every move have now stopped following him.

I wonder what was going on in his mind and if we might imagine a certain wistfulness in his voice when he asks the twelve,

'Do you also wish to go away?'

It seems especially poignant that it is Peter who immediately responds,

'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.'

I was away 'on retreat' this past week, trying to pray and do some preparation for various things coming up in the autumn.

But I was also reading another inspiring book, this time by the Revd Richard Carter from St Martin-in-the-Fields in London. He does a lot of work amongst the homeless, asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom are members of the Nazareth Community – a dispersed community based in London, but with members from all over the world.

Anyway, the book is called *Letters from Nazareth* and is a collection of reflections on the themes of home and being at home: with ourselves, with each other, with the times we're living through, and with God.

Richard writes, *'Why, God? Why do people suffer? Where is your power to save ...? Last week after an hour of silent meditation a member of the Nazareth Community came to me and said: 'In my prayers I kept on asking Jesus on that cross I saw in our east window, "How do you cope? How do you cope in a world like this where this is so much suffering?" And eventually Jesus answered me.'*

'What did he say?' I asked.

'He said, "I don't cope."'

We both laughed. It seemed a relief that sometimes Jesus can't cope too with the suffering of the world; indeed, that is why he was on the cross. You see, he didn't cope. No one copes on a cross. They die. Cope is a limited, limiting word; it's a word about self-preservation and providing temporary solutions. Jesus didn't cope, he loved. There's a world and an eternity of difference. Often we will not cope or be able to control, and that's when we depend on God's love.'

At those times in our lives that are hardest, when we're finding it difficult to understand, to keep following Jesus and to keep trusting and hoping in God's love and grace, how might we respond if we imagine Jesus asking that same question of us that he asked Peter and the other disciples,

'Do you also wish to go away?'

He knows we'll doubt him and argue with him at times, that we'll fail him at times, that we might even betray him and turn away from him at times.

Yet knowing all that, he still loves us, journeys alongside us, washes and cleanses us, invites us for a meal and offers us broken bread and poured out wine in token of his very self, his presence with us.

I'm going to close by playing you this beautiful scripture-based song by Kathryn Scott.

For me the refrain is rather like Peter's response to Jesus, 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' It's at the heart of my faith and reason for keeping on hoping and holding on to God when the going gets tough:

Nothing can take me from Your great love

Forever this truth remains

I belong, I belong to You

Not angels nor demons

No power on earth or Heaven

Not distance nor danger

No trouble now or ever

Nothing can take me from Your great love

Forever this truth remains

I belong, I belong to You

I belong, I belong to You

Not hardship nor hunger

No pain or depth of sorrow

Not weakness nor failure

No broken dream or promise

Nothing can take me from your great love

Forever this truth remains

I belong, I belong to You

I belong, I belong to You