

Sunday 25th August 2024; Trinity 12. Benefice Holy Communion, Ampleforth

The person who compiles the Lectionary we use is very clever! I noticed preparing this that the readings from last week's Gospel and this week, verses 56 - 59 of John's Gospel chapter 6 are in both weeks. These verses bridge what Jesus said last week about him offering life to this week's passage which speaks of human response.

And surprise, surprise, the first response is negative, the disciples complained and said, 'this teaching is difficult, who can accept it?' Then Jesus asks them a decisive question in response, 'Does this offend you?'

Does this offend you. What would our answer be today? We usually associate offending with some nasty malicious remark and not very helpful, so we usually don't consider Jesus' offending us, so it might be easier to change the word to challenge because as always with Jesus in what he says there is a challenge and today it is this. When was the last time Jesus challenged you when he said something that caused you to trip and stumble? Which of his teachings has caused you to think or say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" When have you wanted to turn back from following His way because it was more than you could live by?

We offend and feel offended much of the time by one another, but you tend not to hear people today saying outwardly about stumbling over Jesus' teachings, complaining that they are difficult, or being offended by what he says and does, but what about on the inside? When I look at my own life, it seems I don't see myself taking offence at or complaining about Jesus either. Why not? Why aren't we more offended by Jesus? Why aren't we stumbling and struggling to live the gospel more than

we are? Why aren't we challenged by what He says? Today we are reminded that maybe we should be.

So, are we willing to be offended, challenged, by Jesus, to take that risk? Maybe the degree to which we are offended by the gospel is the degree to which we believe it to be and experience it as His flesh and blood, as life. Maybe that's why the people in today's gospel are grumbling, complaining, and taking offence. They know Jesus isn't simply talking about bread and wine, he's talking about life, about reality.

If the gospel does not cause us offence, to stumble and fall, to challenge then perhaps it is not our reality. If we believe it asks nothing of us, that it is just some nice ideas about how to live, and some feel good verses to scan and then discard, or some pious religious practise we act out on a Sunday, then it becomes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian who was hanged by the Nazi's, called "cheap grace."

No one is offended when Jesus tells us to love our neighbour It's not offensive or a challenge until our neighbour is flesh and blood and someone who looks, acts, and believes differently from us.

Forgiveness is good, in theory. It's part of a healthy relationship but what about the challenge when someone hurts or betrays us, who may not repent or even care, someone who may continue to hurt us. What about them?

We love the cross of Jesus. We wear it, hang it on our walls, it reminds us of how much God loves us and we say follow the way of the cross. We read that means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him. But what happens when we're challenged to give up our individual autonomy or change an aspect of our life for the well-being of someone else?

If loving, forgiving, welcoming, and taking up our cross, do not offend and challenge us, cause us to look at how we are living, make us reconsider our beliefs and actions, then maybe the gospel just isn't flesh and blood reality for us. Maybe we've disembodied the gospel and separated the Word from everyday life. If the gospel is not flesh and blood life, then what difference does it make and why are we here today?

This illustrates that every time the gospel offends us are confronted with a challenge in our life and it's telling us something about how we see the world and ourselves. It reveals the limits of our love, forgiveness, welcome, of our desire for justice, peace-making, and compassion and compels us to seek more, to reconnect with our relationship with Jesus and the life He promises and gives.

“Do you also wish to go away?” is the question Jesus asked the offended disciples. It's the question we face every time we are challenged, we are offended, we stumble, and we try to live without His life within us. It's the question we face every time a situation is difficult, messy, unclear, and asks more of us than we want to give.

Sometimes the answer we would prefer is 'yes' and want to go away, but it is on those occasions that we may be being called by Him to answer as Peter did, and trust that the person we need and should seek, has “the words of eternal life.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.