



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Deserting Jesus

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John 6:60-68

The title for this evening's message is disturbing for us all. 'Deserting Jesus' focuses on the doubt and rejection of some of the early followers.

It comes in a section which serves as a thought-provoking conclusion to John 6. We could go as far as to say that it follows one of the most explicit and challenging offers that Jesus Christ made in his ministry – and from which many of his earliest followers turn away.

It is worth making a distinction between the twelve disciples and a broader group of followers who chose to desert him. This is a point that is reinforced by the fact that Jesus, in a distinctive way and for the first time in John, referred to 'The Twelve' (v.67)

Text: John 6:66 –

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

The reference to the disciples in verse 66 is a clear indication that many who began to associate with Jesus found what he was saying (or even demanding of them) was what led them to consider his words "a hard saying" (v.60)

The people were offered a great gift but, for some, it was just too difficult to understand or, perhaps specifically, to put into practice. How could anyone walk away from such an opportunity to enter into a life with God? The truth is, however, that many did and still continue to do so.

The point we must not be reluctant to address is that many of those who encountered Jesus and began to follow him found his sayings hard. In this case, it follows the Eucharistic challenge that Jesus had made when he said, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (v.53)

New Testament scholar, F F Bruce, wrote a helpful book entitled *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. He examines seventy of the hard sayings of Jesus. We at Wesley Mission would want to strongly emphasise that Jesus' ministry was all of a piece. For me, this means his actions and his way of life are intricately bound up with his words.

We cannot avoid the fact that when we examine the gospels the Jesus we meet there is One who is radically different from the one that has been constructed in too many people's minds – that is an inoffensive person, who would not really disturb anyone.



The Jesus we meet in the gospels, to use Bruce's conclusion, "gave offence right and left". We remind ourselves of how this offence presented itself:-

- At times, his close disciples found him thoroughly disconcerting
- He upset established notions of religious propriety
- He enjoyed the company of very questionable people
- He set out on a road that would ultimately be bound to lead to the cross

It becomes hard for the first audience of Jesus because, as we consider the whole of John, we know that to believe in Jesus Christ is to be united to him by faith and to participate in his life.

We are told that the discourse about the way we understand Jesus Christ as the Bread of Life occurred at the synagogue in Capernaum and, not for the first time, there was a definite reaction to him. At the beginning of Mark, we read that people were amazed as he brought healing to a man who was possessed by an evil spirit.

We read in Mark, "The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!'" (Mark 1:27)

Here in John, the reaction to his teaching is overwhelmingly negative. The thought that the saying is hard could, of course, mean that it is difficult to comprehend, but I suspect it may well be nearer to the thought that it is difficult to live out.

This might be a similar experience to the rich young man who had to sell everything if he was going to follow Jesus.

In both cases the message that is being communicated is that if we are going to follow Jesus Christ, then it must consume our lives and become our ultimate purpose.

The teaching of Jesus then and now is at odds with the way people understand life in our culture. I want to expand on that a little. So much of life around us tells us we are in charge and so everything is about the choices we make. Spend a little time in a bookshop and you'll find that a large amount of printed material focuses upon feeling good about ourselves, even including advice about how to become successful. Religious writers and preachers are not exempt from this error. There is the suggestion sometimes that if we go to the right church and believe in the right way that all is going to be well.

Following Jesus is far more demanding and calls for a radical reorientation of our lives in a living relationship.

The closing paragraph of this substantial chapter vividly points to the cost of following Jesus. Later in the gospel, John will record, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:24-25)



It would appear that in verse 67, Jesus wants to be sure of the position of the Twelve with regard to the challenging call of the gospel. The desertion of 'some' is the direct catalyst for Jesus questioning the Twelve.

This passage has caused me to ask myself why people desert Jesus, but continually being aware of aspects within our own lives that will need to be front of mind as we seek to follow him.

I offer you three suggestions about why people choose to desert Jesus:

People desert Jesus because its involves going the whole way

For the second time in this chapter, we have a similar point being made. In the same way that Jesus not only gives bread but is bread, Jesus asks his people not only to follow him but also to enter into a relationship with him. In doing so, we share the purposes and ministry of Jesus – with all the implications this involves.

Jesus Christ was well aware of the “grumbles” within the crowd. One writer reminds us, “The similarity between his disciples’ protest and those of the crowd is established by the repetition of the verb “to grumble”. Jesus’ awareness of the disciples grumbling is an example of his insight into human nature.”

It is interesting that when people are asked to sign a document, many will look very carefully at what we call ‘the small print’, believing that perhaps the most difficult aspects will be hidden away and will have to be searched for – because they will not be made obvious. Jesus’ behaviour is very different – he does not hide in the ‘small print’ of his ministry what could be considered ‘unwelcome’. The discipleship pattern of Jesus is there for all to hear and read.

One devotional writer adds the thought, “Neither does he ask anything of us that he is not prepared to give himself.”

The Greek word used in this chapter for ‘hard’ does not mean ‘hard to understand’, but rather ‘hard to accept’. If we are to be serious about our Christian living, then we, like the first disciples, need to understand that our Christian call is a lifelong call – or, put in common parlance, it involves ‘going all the way’.

Jim Elliott was a Christian martyr in Ecuador in the 1950s. He kept a very detailed diary and at the age of just 22 he wrote in that diary, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Just seven years later, he met a violent death and demonstrated in his own life that following Jesus means going all the way.

Among the disciples were those who would come to understand this truth in their own lives. The cross is the climax of Jesus’ earthly ministry and yet, as Risen Lord, he calls disciples to the same committed journey – and ‘going all the way’ for them is going to mean rejection and, in many cases, giving up their lives for the sake of the kingdom of God. This message must not be lost on us.



People desert Jesus when the Word and Deed element becomes clear

The events that follow in Jesus Christ's ministry will prove the point that he is making continually throughout his teaching ministry:-

- You are not called to follow Jesus Christ in some kind of obscure religious experience that makes you feel good
- You are not called to follow Jesus Christ alone and isolated from others, but in the fellowship of a believing and serving community
- You are not called to follow Jesus Christ in a way that separates devotion and deeds, but with the two intricately bound together and obvious in the way we live out our Christian discipleship

There are some folks who struggle with the fact that some followers will defect. However hard it is to come to terms with this, most of us will be familiar with situations where this is true; we may even have family members or friends whose experience could be described in this way.

Some drift away for all kinds of reasons; we may be familiar with the term 'fair weather' followers. At the end of Chapter 6, there is a reference to Judas, who was certainly one of the Twelve. Jesus must have seen in him the possibility of service.

There is a terrible story recorded by many writers and told by preachers concerning the artist who painted The Last Supper, which took years to complete. As a model for the face of Christ, he used a young man whose face depicted what he considered to be purity.

When the painting was almost finished, the artist came to the point where he needed a model for the face of Judas, whose face he had left to the last. He searched the haunts of the city and the dens of vice.

At last he found a face that depicted depravity and, when the sitting was at an end, the man said, "You painted me before." "Surely not," said the artist. "O yes," said the man. "I sat for your Christ."

Time and circumstances can be very cruel. As well as ministering amongst those whose lives have been transformed for good, there have also been times when people have fallen by the wayside.

People desert Jesus when they realise they cannot be anonymous in their discipleship

The 'hard' call would be real, not only for those in the crowd, but also for the Twelve.

Peter would understand this more than any – for, within a relatively short period of time, he declared that he did not know Jesus and, understandably, after three denials, we read in Mark, "And he broke down and wept." (Mark 14:72)

We must not underestimate the challenges faced by people in public life, when endeavouring to maintain a Christian discipleship. I recall preaching a series of sermons that was advertised in the local newspaper and, amongst the visitors attending the special services, a prominent member of the community joined the congregation on the back row of the gallery. He arrived during the first hymn and left during the last.



I managed to meet him privately in my office and got to know a little of his personal circumstances, which were difficult. His issues, however, meant he wanted any element of Christian commitment to remain anonymous.

When my wife and I were shopping just two or three years ago, when on leave from Wesley Mission, I stood looking in a window and saw the same gentleman with his wife. He caught a glimpse of me and looked away very quickly. As he walked up the street, my heart went out to him.

When I began my ministry, I worked with a very gifted preacher and I recall many of his sermons. In one address, he compared two texts that could be considered to contradict one another. In Luke 9:50, when speaking to the disciples, Jesus said, "... for whoever is not against you is for you." Just two chapters later, Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me ..." (Luke 11:23)

Initially they may seem to be opposite to one another, but the point that Jesus makes on each occasion is that neutrality is not possible. The difference in emphasis is clear; neutrality and anonymity are not possible for those who are serious about following Jesus.

This may well have been one reason why Nicodemus came under the cover of darkness to see Jesus in John 3. A man who was wealthy, a Pharisee and may have come from a very distinguished family wanted darkness to hide him. To such a man, Jesus spoke of the necessity of new birth and new beginnings.

There is a story from the ministry of John Wesley, who was talking with someone who thought they could be a Christian all by themselves. Wesley got up from his chair, picked up a pair of tongs and took a hot coal out of the fire. Almost immediately it started to go out. Wesley didn't even need to explain the point!

It is difficult, if not impossible, to get a single coal to burn by itself.

We are a people who must recognise what it is to do the will of God. The hard truth is that to live in Christ is:-

- a test of our loyalty and commitment
- calling to us to live above our personal concerns
- inviting us to use every ounce of our belonging to build for what is good

There are some very interesting words found in the Jewish Talmud: "People are born with hands clenched; and die with them wide open. Entering life we desire to grasp everything; leaving the world, all we possessed has slipped away."

There have always been people in every age who turn away from following Jesus. I suppose the challenge to you is – "Will you be one of them?"