

DATE – August 8, 2021

CHURCH – St Matthew’s Kensington

BIBKLE PASSAGE: John 6:51-51

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC – Externals and murmuring

In my career as a school chaplain, I also taught English literature ... Shakespeare and all that. It was wonderful and often challenging. To introduce later teenagers to the ideas of metaphors and similes, or metaphorical language and literal language, to tease out the differences and nuances of such expressions as “You are a tower of strength,” and “You are as strong as a tower.”

In our Gospel passage today from John. 6:41-51, we have the Jews rejecting Jesus, and doing so because of their failure to understand the nuances of his teaching and taking a metaphor as being literal. As we tease out the reasons for their rejecting Jesus, we can get a glimpse of the reasons that people reject Jesus even today.

1.The Jews rejected Jesus because they judged things by human values and by external standards. Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ The Jews said in reply, ‘Oh no he’s not! He’s not bread – he’s a carpenter’s son. He didn’t come down from heaven – he came from Nazareth. God didn’t send him – he grew up in a village. He didn’t come from heaven – Mary and Joseph raised him in their home. Jesus isn’t bread – he’s a tradie – he’s a chippy. He didn’t come from the glory of God – he came from a poor home.’

They confused Jesus’ metaphor of ‘bread’ for something literal.

But from one point of view the Jews were correct. Jesus’ **outward appearance** was not that of a special messenger from God, therefore he couldn’t possibly be a special messenger from God.

T. E. Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – was a famous graduate of Oxford University, a British archaeologist, an army officer, a diplomat and a writer. After he had done all this, he retired from public life and joined the air force, staying there until he was killed. He was a close friend of Thomas Hardy the poet. During his air force days, when he was serving as an aircraftsman, Lawrence sometimes used to visit Hardy and his wife while he was wearing his aircraftsman’s uniform – thus without any badges or insignia. On one such occasion his visit coincided with a visit of the Mayoress of Dorchester. She was quite affronted that she had to meet a mere aircraftsman with such a common surname. She had no idea who he was. The Mayoress said to Mrs Hardy in French – “Jamais de ma vie je n’ai eu à m’asseoir prendre le thé avec un simple soldat.” – “Never in my life have I had to sit down to tea with a private soldier.”

There was silence – rather embarrassed and foreboding.

T. E Lawrence spoke. “Je vous demande pardon madame, mais puis-je vous être utile comme interprète? Madame Hardy ne parle pas le français.” —

“I beg your pardon Madame, but can I be of any assistance as an interpreter? Mrs Hardy knows no French.”

This snobbish, discourteous Dorchester woman had made a shattering mistake because she judged by externals and by worldly social standards. Because Lawrence looked common, therefore he must have been common in the Mayoress’ view. That’s what the Jews did. They confused Jesus’ **metaphorical** bread for **literal language** bread. They got the book and its cover thoroughly confused.

In the Old Testament the prophet Samuel had been tempted to do this also when he went to anoint one of Jesse's sons to be the king. Samuel would have chosen the tallest, or the strongest, or the winner of Mister Israel Body Builder to be the new king. But God's message to Samuel was, "... the Lord does not see as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7). In our gospel reading the Jews failed to look at Jesus' heart.

God's messengers are many and are varied – female and male; old, middle aged and young; Asian, African/American and Middle Eastern; sometimes you and sometimes me. When we become so fixated on the *look* of God's messenger, we can distract ourselves from the *import* of God's message. Let us avoid the Jews' mistake of so emphasising the *external*, that we fail to hear, and so reject the *internal* voice of God.

2. The Jews rejected Jesus because they complained and argued with each other. In John 6:43, "Jesus answered them, 'Do not murmur among yourselves.'" They were so engrossed with their private arguments that it seems never to have occurred to them to refer the decision to God. "What is this bread of life?" they said. "Jesus didn't come down from heaven," they muttered. "We know Joseph and Mary." Mutter ... mutter ... mutter ... rhubarb ... rhubarb ... rhubarb. "I'll tell you what *I* think." "*My* argument is this ..." "Here's *my* opinion..."

Now, I have to be careful not to overpaint or underpaint the picture here. There are deeply-held views and opinions at either end of the spectrum, and people **HAVE** studied the Bible to get the principles right ... people **HAVE** prayed extensively and earnestly and biblically to try to work out God's mind ... and after all those spiritual exercises sometimes they still cannot agree. They discuss, they meet each other half-way when they can ... but even so, there is no common mind. I'll mention two such topics that are currently causing us Anglicans to search, to read, to think, to meditate, to pray, to discuss – Marriage equality, and abortion.

These are deep social and spiritual issues that Christian people feel deeply about, and they are issues that have put Christians into opposing camps. The trouble comes when we mutter and mumble and grizzle and groan *about each other* and get side-tracked *off the issue itself*. Because Herbert's point of view is different to Amy's, that does not mean that they must therefore hate each other or withdraw from one another. As soon as we play the man and not the ball, we fall into this Jewish problem of murmuring among themselves.

For Christian people, fellowship and friendship are too important to be sacrificed in the destructive fires of murmurings and mutterings. The apostles Peter and Paul had huge differences over whether Gentiles could be a part of the infant church – but Peter and Paul maintained their sometimes-rocky fellowship — and look! The Christian Church is now international and universal, with Gentiles all over the place.

Let's consider these three things from today's Gospel reading

1. Understanding Jesus' use of metaphor.
2. Going beyond externals so that we may see God's message.
3. The value of fellowship, and the destructive force of mutterings.

(1085 words)