

SERMON PREACHED AT ST MATTHEW'S KENSINGTON, SUNDAY AUGUST
22nd at 8.30 am Based on John 6 : 66-71

When you look back on things from the standpoint of a few years, you are able almost to put your finger on the time when something started to go wrong – a failed marriage perhaps, or a country's demise such as Afghanistan, or a friend's health. And looking back over Jesus' life and ministry, we are conscious that there came a time when his popularity began to fade, and the forces that opposed him started to gain strength.

The "bread of life" teaching that we have been looking at in John 6 for a few weeks now, may well have been the time when the tide started to turn against Jesus. 5,000 people had been miraculously and marvellously fed. This man could feed the people, meet their needs, they thought. But "No," he said. You've had the physical bread, but there's no more.

This Jesus had such a new and refreshing way of teaching spiritual truth – he was the teacher of such sensible and illustrative parables. But here he was now, talking about himself in gentle, sacrificial terms. It was too much. The physical food supply had ended ... there was questionable spiritual teaching .. maybe he's not all that we cracked him up to be, the people started to think.

And so, in this morning's gospel reading, we see three reactions to Jesus.

Defection. "Many of his disciples turned back and would not walk with him any more." (John 6:66). They had seen his miracles and had followed him. They had aligned themselves with the band of 12 disciples and had followed him. In Samaria many people heard the testimony of the woman at the well, and had followed him. In Galilee they had been fed by him and had followed him.

But now – many turned back and followed him no more. There were probably various reasons. For example, you couldn't challenge the institutional religious leaders as Jesus had done, and get away with it for ever. Better to get out now before disaster struck him and his followers.

If they could no longer get anything from him – like food – there was no point in sticking with him. Better to leave.

The romance and the glamour of this new teacher and his teaching started to fade in the reality of the difficulty of his teachings and the moral demands of his teachings. Better to leave and find something else more palatable.

As they came to understand that Jesus' way was not the way of privilege and applause, but the way of service and self-giving, they thought it better to leave. **Defection.**

I guess we all know of people who started walking with Jesus, but who have gone away. People we've known here in our parish – people we've known in other places. But that is the way of following Jesus. It's not all beer and skittles; sometimes it's hard graft. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

But how encouraging and affirming it is to share our Christian lives with those who have run the marathon of faith with us – who have shared with us in years of service and self-giving.

What was it that St Paul said? “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.” (2 Timothy 4:7)

Praise God for so many faithful, persevering Christians such as many here who can say exactly that, with St Paul. Others may defect and no longer walk with Christ. But we walk with him, and talk with him, and we have proved his love and his grace and his faithfulness all through our years.

Deterioration. We see this above all in Judas. Verses 70-71. At the start Jesus must have seen in Judas a man who could be used for Jesus’ purposes. But instead of a hero, Judas became a villain. He may have become a saint, but he became a shame.

There is a terrible story about an artist who painted a picture of the Last Supper. It was to be a great painting, and it took years and years to do. At the start, the artist set out to find a model for the face of Jesus. He eventually found a young man whose face was transcendently lovely and pure. And the artist painted him as Jesus.

Over the years the artist searched for faces for the disciples – a doubting face for Thomas; a confident, rugged face for Peter; a fisherman’s face for Andrew. The search for those 11 faces took 20 years.

And Judas last of all. The artist searched the lowest haunts of the city, he searched the dens of iniquity and vice. Years of searching. At last ... at last he espied a man whose face was just right – depraved and vicious. A model for the face of Judas.

When the sittings were at an end, the man said to the artist, “You have painted me before.” “I certainly have not,” replied the artist. “Yes,” said the man. “Years ago, you painted me – I was Jesus.” The years had brought a terrible deterioration.

And the years can do that. They can take away our ideals, and our dreams, and our enthusiasms and our loyalties. The years can leave us with a life that has grown smaller- and not bigger. The years can leave us with a heart that is shrivelled, and has not expanded in the love of God. There can be a lost loveliness in life - may we be saved from that!

And there was **Determination.** Peter spoke on behalf of the disciples - “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus had asked them, “And will you also go away?” There went the crowds. And there was a devil among the disciples. And dear old Peter – he who sometimes spoke before he thought – Peter said, “No. To whom shall we go?”

Peter did not understand every comma and full-stop of what Jesus said. He was just as puzzled as everyone else. But there was something about Jesus – he couldn’t put his finger on it – he couldn’t put words around it. But there was something.

In the end, Christianity is not a philosophy that we accept. In the end, Christianity is not a theory to which we give allegiance. In the end, Christianity is not something that is thought out. Christianity is a personal response to Jesus Christ. It is the answer of our heart to the magnet of Christ. It is an allegiance and a love that we give - - - simply because our heart will not allow us to do anything else. (1,111 words)