

## [John 6:1-21](#)

Early in the pandemic my wife received a letter inviting us to take part in monthly testing for COVID-19 on behalf of the Office for National Statistics. Whenever you've seen reports about the ONS data, we've been part of that.

More recently, testing has become much more frequent than monthly for many people. Our kids had to take twice-weekly tests to attend their Sixth Form colleges on site. We ministers in my Methodist circuit have talked about self-testing before taking services and other appointments.

And testing is a major theme in today's reading:

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' <sup>6</sup> He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

But to my mind that's just the first of three tests in the passage. All three tests are tests of faith in Jesus, but in different ways.

Today, I'd like to explore those three tests of faith to think about how Jesus tests our faith in him.

### **Firstly, faith goes beyond our *understanding*:**

<sup>7</sup> Philip answered him, 'It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!'

<sup>8</sup> Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, <sup>9</sup> 'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'

It's hard to be cruel about Philip and Andrew. They survey the scene, gather the evidence, and come to a conclusion.

Now I'm a big fan of evidence, logic, and reason. I'm quite an analytical person. But if this story had stopped at this point, it would have been tragic.

And sadly many church stories or individual Christian stories stop at a similar point. Jesus starts challenging them and the response is, 'But we can't do it.' It all shuts down there. We can't do it. End of.

It's true that Philip and Andrew couldn't sort out the problem. It's true that Christians and churches on their own can't do what Jesus calls them to do.

But the issue is this: what is Jesus saying? What does Jesus want to do?

Because for all the value of reason, logic, and evidence-gathering, the ultimate question here is Jesus saying, 'Do you trust me enough to do what I say?'

When we do, then amazing things happen. When we don't, we drift into spiritual decline.

**Secondly, faith goes beyond our *preferences*:**

<sup>14</sup> After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' <sup>15</sup> Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

You can see the preferences and the preconceived ideas going on in the people here. 'We have just been miraculously fed. A king feeds his people. We want and need a king, especially one who will get rid of the Roman occupying forces. Let's make Jesus king.'

But as we know with hindsight, Jesus refused that idea of kingship. The kingdom of God is different.

Sometimes we have our own preconceived ideas of Jesus, too. And those preconceived ideas are often based on what we would *prefer* to believe. So I've been in a service where I've read a passage from the Gospels in which Jesus says some tough things, only for someone to tell me afterwards, 'Jesus wouldn't have said anything like that.' The trouble is, they've got a fantasy Jesus in their minds, one that won't disturb their comfortable little worlds, one who conveniently agrees with them on sensitive subjects.

One of the most common forms of this fantasy Jesus is believing he loves us as we are (which is true) but forgetting that he loves us too much to leave us as we are (thus avoiding challenging things like the way Jesus challenges us to be transformed). It's all the benefits of the Gospel, but none of the responsibilities.

The only real faith in Jesus is one where we accept and worship him for who he is, and where we are willing to come under the authority of his teaching, not our wishful thinking.

The crowd missed out on the real Jesus. Let's make sure we don't.

**Thirdly and finally, faith goes beyond our *fears*:**

Now we move onto the story of Jesus walking on the water.

<sup>19</sup> When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened.

Well, who wouldn't be frightened by such an out of the blue experience? I'm sure I would be.

And even if we haven't had strange supernatural experiences like that, it's also true that in whatever way Jesus starts to come close to people, many become frightened like the disciples did.

Why is that? I think many of us become so conscious of our sins and failures when Jesus comes close that all we can think of is to say, 'Please stay your distance!'

It's like we want just enough Jesus to be sure our sins are forgiven, but not so much Jesus that we can't cope. Because in our hearts we know that the fluffy fantasy Jesus I talked about in the last point doesn't exist.

C S Lewis captured the feeling in this famous passage from 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe':

"Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"..."Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

And so it's no wonder that when the disciples are frightened to see Jesus walking on the water towards their boat, what we read next is this:

<sup>20</sup> But he said to them, 'It is I; don't be afraid.' <sup>21</sup> Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

Let our faith overcome our fear of Jesus and welcome him close, because he is good. His presence makes a difference to the disciples with their boat reaching shore immediately, and he will make a difference to us, too.

Could it be that one reason we don't see so much of Jesus' power in our churches is that we don't want him to come too close to us? Maybe it's time to choose faith over fear.

So let's wrap with a **summary**:

Jesus tests our faith, because alongside all our gifts of reason we still need to trust him.

He tests our faith so that we put our trust in the real Jesus, not some fantasy Saviour.

And he tests our faith so that it wins out over fear of him, he draws closer to us, and we begin to see amazing things happen for the kingdom of God.

So let's not run away when Jesus tests our faith. He tests us so that our faith grows and the kingdom of God extends.

That's what we want. Isn't it?