

[John 6:56-69](#)

Sometimes you must clear things away before you can begin a task. Perhaps you go to the kitchen to make a snack, only to find that another family member has left unwashed frying pans and dirty chopping boards in the space you need.

Or maybe you need to get over certain obstacles. You may be out for a walk in the woods, but your path is blocked by fallen trees. You need to clamber over them or find a way around them.

I think we have some 'clearing away' to do if we are to get at the meaning of this week's passage. Many Christians hear Jesus' reference to eating his flesh and drinking his blood (verse 56) and assume this is elaborate teaching about Holy Communion. I want to explain why I think that's wrong so that we can get to what I believe these verses are really about.

We need to make a few observations. One is this: there is plenty of reference to bread but absolutely none to wine in the passage. A second is that the bread is tied to Jesus and his word. The bread is more to do with word than sacrament.

A third observation is that John has no reference to the institution of the Lord's Supper at the meal Jesus shares with his friends on the night he is betrayed. Instead, he describes Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Now some say, John put this passage in instead, but that's to assume John has to say something about communion. In fact, where Matthew, Mark, and Luke tie the institution of the Lord's Supper to the Passover, John ties the actual death of Jesus to the Passover.

I think the plain meaning is that John doesn't teach about the Lord's Supper at all. At most, he assumes his readers are familiar with Mark's Gospel and know about it from there. He doesn't need to repeat it.

So that's my little bit of clearing away in this passage. It's not about Holy Communion. What is it about?

Well, even at this point we may have to begin with the question of a misunderstanding. Is it possible that some of Jesus' hearers took him so literally that they thought he was referring to cannibalism?

Well, it's possible, but there's no accounting for stupidity, because it only takes a moment to reflect on how unlikely it would be that one person's body could feed everyone, even if cannibalism wasn't revolting.

Perhaps instead it's a deliberate misunderstanding, because what Jesus seems to be talking about is a total commitment to him. To ingest him, to take on his words as being 'full of the Spirit and life' (verse 63) means he is calling his disciples to go all-in on following him.

The problem comes in this form: as the old saying puts it, 'Jesus is a capitalist: he only believes in takeover bids.' And many of us are not up for being taken over. We'd like a nice, friendly relationship with Jesus, but not a takeover. And I believe it's something like that which leads many of the disciples to grumble and walk away from him at this point (verses 60-61, 66).

What should Jesus do? I think many of us would suggest that he offers these disgruntled disciples a compromise, just as we might tell a husband and a wife to compromise when they are having an argument.

On that basis, when Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, we would have said to that wealthy man, 'Don't walk away! Is there a certain percentage you would agree to?'

But this is not a relationship between equals, like a marriage. Jesus says he is going to ascend to where he was before (verse 62) – that is, to the right hand of the Father in glory. We are not his equals!

I've often said that one of our problems in the Church is that we want the benefits of the Gospel without the responsibilities, and that seems to be going on in today's story. The crowd loved the feeding of the five thousand and they tracked Jesus down to this synagogue in Capernaum (verse 59) but now Jesus faces them with the demands of his kingdom.

You might say the crowd wants Jesus as Saviour but not as Lord, and that's not far off some of our attitudes at times. It's nice to have the forgiveness of sins, but really we'd rather keep on sinning and just showing up for the forgiveness.

You know, this is a critical problem for us. There are ways in which some people in our churches are very deeply committed, and our churches as institutions couldn't run without them. Well has it been said that some of our churches are like a football match, where twenty-two thousand people

desperately in need of exercise watch twenty-two people desperately in need of a rest.

But important and helpful as that commitment is to our ongoing work, it's not the kind of commitment I'm talking about today. Because an out-and-out commitment to him and the cause of his kingdom needs to come before anything else.

We might want to take him aside and quietly say to him, 'Jesus, haven't you learned the lessons that the politicians have? They've known for years that when their parties are led by extremists they don't win the popular vote and they don't get into power. That's why the Labour Party elected Tony Blair and why more recently they got rid of Jeremy Corbyn. If you want influence in the world, you need to be more moderate, more middle-of-the-road.'

But Jesus will never listen to advice like that. Electoral popularity is not what he is about. It's about submitting to him as Lord and seeking his kingdom, not electoral popularity. He knows only a minority will take the narrow way. Our mission may be, in that popular contemporary expression, 'to make Jesus famous' but it is not to make Jesus popular.

I can't help thinking of some words I used to quote in sermons many years ago. I thought I'd dig them out again for today.

In 1954 a missionary in Vietnam was told by a Viet Cong guerrilla officer, 'I would gladly die if I could advance the cause of communism one more mile. You know, as you have read to me from the Bible I have come to believe that you Christians have a greater message than that of communism. But I believe that we are going to win the world, for Christianity means something to you, but communism means everything to us.'¹

Is that what Jesus is driving at in today's passage? That it's not enough for him to mean *something* to us, he has to mean *everything*? Is that why we don't make much impression on the world, why we in the Church often seem so weak and ineffective – that Christianity means something to us, but not everything?

So – will we be the disgruntled disciples who desert Jesus because he refuses to be the spiritual sugar daddy that they want, or will we be like Simon Peter,

who knows there's really no other sensible choice but to stay with Jesus, when he says,

'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'

You may say, 'But I will mess up, I *do* mess up, how can I go all in with Jesus?'

To which I reply, who is it I just quoted about staying with Jesus? It's a disciple who messed up royally but discovered forgiveness and restoration. Just because Jesus wants to take us over doesn't mean he's withdrawn the offer of forgiveness.

And I would say the same from my own life. I can think of areas where I'd rather I didn't have to yield to Jesus, and it's a battle, but my intention is to be his disciple. Any of you who know me personally will have some level of insight into my failures, but God is full of grace and mercy and is working on me, even if progress seems glacially slow at times.

'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'

I pray that we can all say the same as Simon Peter.

¹ Clive Calver, *Sold Out*, p6.