Over the last few weeks we’ve been looking at Jesus’ fairly lengthy discourse where he says “I am the bread of life”. It’s not the most easy teaching to follow. You may like to have the Bible open at our Gospel reading – John 6:56-69 on page 95 of the New Testament section of the Church Bibles.

It was more of a dialogue than a discourse, and it probably took place over a period – perhaps a few days. It happened in Capernaum, and in verses 24 and 25 they were all beside the lake. However, by the time we get to verse 59 they’re in the synagogue. It seems the Jews ask Jesus something, they get a bit of teaching from him, the Jews go away and argue about it or come back with another question, they get some more teaching, there’s more...

---

1 Proper 16 Year B
argument, then more teaching – and so it goes on. And each time the Jews come back it seems they get more confused.

But in our Gospel reading today we reached the end of the discourse, or dialogue, and that means we got to what was the crunch point for Jesus and the people who heard him originally. What did the people who heard this teaching at the time make of it?

They sum it up in four words. No messing. “This teaching is difficult!”

Not really surprising, in view of what has gone before. In fact, of course, they go further – they don’t just say, “This teaching is difficult”; they go on to say, “Who can accept it?” And, as we read on, we find that many of them drifted away at this point. In verse 66 of our Gospel reading we see, “Many of his disciples no longer went about with him.” They couldn’t accept it.

It’s difficult. It’s not a walkover, being a Christian, a follower of Jesus. When I was at school (a long time ago now!), I remember there were a number of Jewish lads in the class, and they used to say how easy our religion, Christianity, the nominal religion of most of the other boys, seemed compared with theirs. “Yours is an easy religion – ours is a difficult one” they said. The truth was, Christianity seemed easy because most of us didn’t take it sufficiently seriously. G K Chesterton, the writer, who was also a devout Catholic, and who it seems was always game for a pithy comment, once said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

Following Jesus is not a simple matter. It takes commitment, a certain amount of effort, a willingness at times to step out in faith into the unknown. Sometimes, of course, it involves much more than that – a willingness to be different, maybe to stand up against the views and practices of the wider community, even, at times, to suffer ridicule or persecution.

But I don’t want to overstate the position. My guess is that, in this discourse we have been studying, Jesus went out of his way to be as shocking and provocative as he could. In a way, he wanted to put people off – certainly the people who had got hold of some wrong ideas about him. Earlier in the chapter, back in verse 15, we see that the people wanted to make him king – the kind of king who would be expected to lead a revolution to throw off the Roman occupiers. That was not what Jesus had come for and it would not help at all! So Jesus wanted his hearers either to be quite clear about his mission and what he had come to do or, if they weren’t, to go away and not try to make him into something or somebody he wasn’t.

And the difficulty the Jews had with Jesus was not so much a matter of commitment or effort but of understanding. They couldn’t get their heads round what he was saying. I suspect that, as we have the benefit of hindsight, we have less difficulty than they did in
understanding it. Jesus was saying, not just that he was the Bread of Life but that people had to eat his flesh. And, as we heard last week, the Jews asked the obvious question, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

The Jews evidently envisaged Jesus meant putting him on the dining table and setting about him with a knife and fork – not to mention drinking his blood. It’s no wonder they were confused and, indeed, put off. For most of us, both the idea of Jesus as the Bread of Life and the idea of eating his flesh are understood symbolically, and as the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, the Communion. Some Christians understand it through the idea of transubstantiation – don’t worry about that word if you don’t know what it means – it probably doesn’t apply to you!

As Marion reminded us last week, Jesus wants us not only to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest his teaching but also his very being. This is what he is getting at – it’s not just treating him as a great teacher with a few good things to say. It’s a matter of him abiding in us and us abiding in him, as the first verse of our reading today – verse 56 – picks up – “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”

What Jesus is talking about is having a really close relationship with him – so close it’s like he is inside us and we are inside him. Eating him is not a bad picture. If we look again at our diagram – on page 1 and also the back of Open Door – we see there the idea that we are in God – and it’s a loving embrace. That love is really deep, really close. He abides in us and we in him. But it isn’t just something that happens. However much God may love us, we don’t enjoy the full benefit of the relationship until we have responded. It needs us to take a conscious decision.

And that decision needs action – it’s more just than ticking a box or just going through the motions. This is where the picture of eating comes in. And the point Jesus is making, as Marion pointed out last week, is that it’s no good just giving Jesus a little nibble. The word Jesus used is more like crunch or chew. We have to give him a good munch, gorge ourselves on him, make pigs of ourselves with him! Have a feast of Jesus!

We’ll look in a moment at what having a feast of Jesus might mean in practice. But it’s very easy to get distracted or diverted even once we have made a decision. Our reading from Joshua reminds us of that – here Joshua also invites people to make a decision whether to serve the Lord or the many other religions of the people around them. Joshua reminds then that they and their ancestors had often followed those other gods. They had been tempted and distracted. The people assure Joshua they will serve the Lord – but, if you know anything of the Old Testament story, you’ll know that promise was honoured more often in the breach than in the observance! They would be tempted and distracted again and again.

But, returning to our Gospel story, even though there were several disciples who turned away from Jesus at that point, there was one group who did not – the twelve apostles, led
as ever by Peter. And, as we know, because if it had been otherwise the church would never have got off the ground, they were not distracted or diverted, then or afterwards. “Do you also wish to go away?” asks Jesus, in verse 67. Peter answers [v 68], “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

The apostles, or, certainly, Peter, had realised that, despite the difficulty of the idea of eating Jesus’ flesh, there in what Jesus had said were words of immense importance, and what Jesus had to offer was certainly worth staying on for. Peter uses the words’ “eternal life” – but we can see, from what Jesus says just before, that there is an equivalence between eternal life and the idea of “abiding” – Jesus abiding in us and we in him. In verse 56 Jesus says that those who eat will abide in him; in verse 57 he says that whoever eats will live. You can find other places in those few verses which say much the same. Eternal life isn’t just life going on for ever – it is life lived in relationship with Jesus – with him abiding in us and we in him. Peter obviously saw that this was what really matters – having that deep, intimate relationship, having that life.

What Peter and, hopefully, the other apostles could see was that, even if it was a bit difficult to understand, even if it needed a bit of effort, even though there would be distractions, it was well worth while. Above all else he wanted that relationship with Jesus, that life. And it’s worth going back to the idea of “feasting on Jesus”. It’s not all graft and hard work! A feast is something you generally enjoy! It’s something you might well look forward to! Getting to know Jesus and letting him abide in us can be at times exciting – and it is certainly rewarding – take it from me! That’s not to say there are no problems or that it is not sometimes difficult – and Peter and the apostles had their share of problems as time went on. But it didn’t dampen their underlying enthusiasm!

What does it mean in practice, then, to “feast on Jesus” – to munch him and crunch him? A very important part of it is, of course, our Communion, when we enact that very activity. But every time we pray, every time we read the Bible or perhaps learn about our faith and about Jesus in some other way is a part of it, too. Sometimes, I fear, prayer and Bible reading and even worship tend to feel more like a chore than a joy and, while there may be a number of reasons that happens, it seems to me so sad. We are getting in touch with Jesus himself! He has the words of eternal life! Making the effort is worth while!

Marion reminds us (just occasionally!) that the Christian life is cross-shaped – the vertical representing the relationship we have with God and the horizontal our relationship with others and the way we reach out to those around us and the world. It’s the vertical bit that holds the horizontal bit up! And the vertical bit is the bigger bit, too. Developing our relationship with Jesus is the bigger bit! Feasting on Jesus is what supports all the rest!

For our second reading today we read Paul’s description of the armour of God, which he encourages us to wear. It’s another picture of the Christian life. It’s one of the more well-known parts of Paul’s writings. I wonder if you noticed that, of all the pieces of armour that
“Make your mind up time” – Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity

Paul mentions, only one of them is actually a weapon for attack – the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, right at the end of the list. All the rest are defensive, or things that build us up or support us – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith and so on. These are very different pictures from the pictures of eating and abiding that Jesus used, but they still have the same emphasis – building ourselves up in the faith, and knowledge of the truth about Jesus come first. We need this solid, personal grounding in Jesus and what we believe before we ever set out to wield the sword of the Spirit!

Going back to our Gospel reading, Jesus effectively challenged those who heard him to make their minds up about him and either follow him or go – to decide whether they wanted eternal life and a close, intimate relationship with God or not. Those who decided they wanted eternal life, that they wanted him to abide in them, would need to make the effort – the effort to “feast on him” – in prayer, in teaching, in worship and many other ways – including, certainly for those first apostles, suffering and hardship.

We may well be able to avoid the suffering and hardship, but, if we are to have the relationship with Jesus which is eternal life, if he is to abide in us and we in him, we do need to remember it doesn’t just happen. Building a relationship – any relationship – takes effort. It’s not going to be easy all the time, but it won’t be a chore or a graft. When we are building a relationship with Jesus, we need to feast on him – to approach him in prayer, in worship, in study of his word with the enthusiasm of coming to a banquet! He will not disappoint us.