

"From this time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." (John 6:66)

Over these last few weeks, our Gospel readings have been from the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to St John. This chapter, as we were reflecting last week, as if follows on from St John's account of the feeding of the multitude, draws the contrast between the manna given to the people in the desert of Sinai and the true bread that Jesus offers in himself. As we also saw last week, Jesus used quite stark, uncompromising language in which he spoke of the need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man.

This caused some consternation among the religious leaders who sought him out to question him. It also caused, as we read in our Gospel reading today, many who had followed him up to that point to turn away - they gave up their discipleship, they gave up on Jesus. He had gone too far. As they left they probably felt a mixture of emotions - confusion, disappointment, disillusionment, maybe even anger.

This set me thinking on reasons people have for giving up on Jesus, maybe times we have felt like giving up.

Some give up on Jesus because they see the demands as too high and are simply not prepared to make the sacrifice. I suppose that was at the back of the rich young ruler's turning away from Jesus when our Lord told him to give away all that he had and come and follow him. Jesus and his teaching attracted him but that was as far as he was prepared to go at that stage. The attractions

of wealth, of prestige, of comfort outweighed in his mind whatever Jesus was offering. There was an inherent failure to realise just what was on offer, the priceless treasure of peace with God through faith in Christ. As it is he goes his own way.

But that is not the only reason. It has to be said that some give up walking with Jesus not because of anything that Jesus has demanded but because of the attitudes and actions of other Christians. In too many instances, almost without thinking about it, the Gospel has been overlaid by what I can only call a culture of respectability and social conformity. In the context of Northern Ireland, I knew people who did not feel they could come to communion because they smoked – what other people would think of them. I happen to think that Christ is far more concerned about my willingness to forgive someone who has wronged me, my attitude to the poor and marginalised in our society than whether I take the odd cigarette or not – or whatever happens to be our own particular hang-up. Then of course a cliqueishness can develop in any community based on any number of issues – the predominant socio economic grouping, predominant attitudes on a range of political or social issues – those outside the predominant group can all too easily feel excluded and marginalised, they become discouraged and drift away

What I am really talking about here is slipping into a situation where the culture begins to overlay and even obscure the heart of the Gospel - which is the promise of new life in Christ. When that happens the Christian life becomes a matter of fitting in, of keeping, or trying to keep an ever lengthening list of rules or social conventions rather than a life transformed not just in

behaviour but in attitudes towards other people - transformed by our own encounter with the living Christ.

I think we need to ask are some people put off by the teachings of Jesus or is the problem rather with a secondary set of man made regulations and attitudes which seem to say that if you want to be a Christian you have to fit in..

Some I know have given up on their walk with God because of some crisis in life and they have felt themselves totally alone, totally powerless. As I remarked the other week, one very sharp memory in my own life was in the year leading up to my ordination learning that my mother had been diagnosed as suffering from cancer. I can still remember at the time physically not being able to say sections of the Creed, of feeling angry and hurt. At the time I was in the Divinity School - I think what helped me through that time was the gentle friendship of students and staff who mediated something of the love of God at a time when I felt little love towards him.

A Christian community can do much to encourage us in our walk with God. We really do need to be very aware of how we reach out to those on the edge of Church life, those who are hurting for whatever reason - we can do much to encourage - but can also discourage folk on their walk with God.

Finally, let us be honest, we are often discouraged in our own walk with God not because we have not tried - rather because we have tried, really tried. We have given it our best shot and we are aware we have failed, tripped by the old familiar temptations - we just feel we have let ourselves down, let Jesus down

and at times we fell like just giving up. We have forgotten the fundamental lesson of the old Baptismal promises. What is the answer to that question: "Will you obey and serve Christ?" "I will, by God's help" We were never expected to do this by ourselves. Part of the secret of a walk with God is that it is just that - a walk with God - not a struggle towards some inaccessible God. We may struggle at times, we may fail but we learn that this same God who has called us, remains with us, ready to strengthen, ready to forgive when we acknowledge our failure.

This is where the closing words of our Gospel reading strike home to me. We get to a stage like Peter when, although we may be a bit shaky in our discipleship, in our understanding of Jesus, we know that there really is nowhere else to go. For we know that in Jesus lies the key to our peace, in Jesus lies the source of our strength. We may not fully understand, we may make a mess of things from time to time, but there really is no where else to go.