

Ps 123:1,2
Ps 65:2
Ps 142:4,5,6
Ps 116:9,10
Hy 24:2,5,7
John 6
John 6:67

Yarrow, April 11, 2010

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Our culture cultivates a spirit of self-sufficiency; you need to be a man, get your shoulders under the job, and accomplish on own initiative. There's something positive about that, inasmuch as God in fact created us to act responsibly and so to take initiative and exert oneself.

But there's also a distinct danger to the 'can-do' spirit of our day, and that's that we forget our complete dependence on our Maker for every aspect of our existence. Food on the table, paying the bills, happiness in the home, even eternal life: I'm dependent on *me* to get things done.... I've got to get my act together to make things happen....

The apostle John wrote his gospel so that his readers might –he says– “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). Implication: without believing you have no life. That does not put you in neutral waters, with the option of choosing to go left or right, choosing for life or death; John's point is that none of his readers have any life in themselves without the Lord, all are dead. But the dead accomplish nothing, the dead are *dependent* on Another to receive life. There's no 'can-do' spirit among the lifeless....

To drive this point home to his readers –and that includes you and me– John strings the events recorded in chap 6 into one package, climaxing in the pointed conversation around our text between Jesus and His disciples. He would have His followers admit their total dependence on Jesus Christ for every breath of every day – and if they can't bring themselves to confess such total dependence, perhaps they should join the crowds who've deserted Jesus....

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

JESUS CHALLENGES HIS DISCIPLES TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THEY HAVE LIFE ONLY IN HIM.

1. When the challenge is made
2. Why the challenge is focused
3. How the challenge is answered

1. When the challenge is made

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” That was the question Jesus put to His twelve disciples. We wonder why. What prompted Jesus to question the twelve on the point?

The immediate answer is given in the verse preceding our text. There we read, vs 66: “From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.” Jesus saw the crowds disappearing, and so turned to the twelve: ‘you see them going; do you want to go too?’

That raises the next question. Why were Jesus' crowd of followers disappearing on Him? For we read in the beginning of ch 6 that Christ had a very large crowd of admirers. Vs 1: “Jesus went over the sea of Galilee... [and] a great crowd of people followed Him.” The size of that multitude is

revealed to us in 10, where John records that “the men sat down, about 5000 of them” – and that’s only the men!

That was at the beginning of this chapter. At the end –and that’s no more than 24 hours later!– that number has dwindled down so far that Jesus must turn to His inner circle of students and ask if they too wanted to go. Why had His popularity evaporated so quickly? The problem, it would appear, lay with Jesus Himself. Consider the following factors:

- a. After Christ had fed this crowd of 5000 men (plus whatever women and children were present), the multitude agreed together that Jesus was indeed the prophet who was to come into the world (vs 14). They become ecstatic, and decided together that this man should be their king. In a word: they *want* Him. But what did Jesus do? Vs 15: “Jesus ... withdrew again to a mountain by Himself.” It’s not the crowds that left Jesus; it’s Jesus who left the crowds.
- b. The same kind of thing happened the next morning. It wasn’t Jesus who sought out the crowds; it was the people who sought Jesus. They launched their boats and crossed the sea in search of the prophet Jesus (vs 24).
- c. But the surest evidence, congregation, that the crowds were more interested in Jesus than Jesus was in the crowds would appear to lie in Jesus’ words as they are recorded in the second half of the chapter. That second half contains a summary of the sermon Jesus preached to the crowds who sought Him. The reaction of the crowd to the sermon is caught in vs 66: “this is a hard teaching; who can accept it?” No, the point was not that Jesus’ sermon went above their heads. The point was rather that His sermon made them so terribly uncomfortable; it cut into the heart of the people. Jesus didn’t mince His words, didn’t seek to be ‘nice’; with that sermon He hurt the people. *That’s why the people left.*

What was the sermon about? I draw your attention to two critical sentences in the sermon that catch its underlying message. Vs 48: Jesus says He is “the bread of life”, and vs 44: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (vs 44).

What was so offensive, congregation, about those two sentences? Think about it, beloved. That first sentence –“I am the bread of life”– means simply that one must consume Christ Jesus in order to have life. Vs 53: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.” That is: I am life-less, I am dead, I have no life in myself. That’s not a general truism; this is hard reality for *me*. That is: *I* need the life-giving bread that came from heaven because *I* am dead! And that, we understand, destroys any ‘can-do’ spirit, any sense of self-confidence. This confession *hurts, offends.*

That’s how Jesus meant it. He did not preach general truths. Jesus instead addressed the individual man. And He said of each of His thousands of followers that they were all dead and lost, and that the only way any single one of them could be saved was through Jesus Christ alone, the source of life. That was the point of Jesus’ sermon: people need to turn to Jesus Christ to receive life *or* remain in their deadness. There’s no alternative.

That second theme of the Lord’s sermon –“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him”– drove home the same point. To *draw* – that’s to be *dragged*. It’s not the cooperative, willing person that is drawn, dragged to Christ. It’s the uncooperative that get dragged. You do not *drag* a dog; you *walk* a dog – the dog cooperates. But you don’t *walk* a sack of potatoes; you *drag* a sack of potatoes – the sack does not cooperate, it has no life of its own, it’s lifeless. Jesus says: no one can come to Me unless the Father draw Him, drag Him. That is: no one walks to the Christ, no one cooperates in coming to Christ; all who come to Christ need to *be dragged* to Him like a sack of potatoes. And why is that? Behind Jesus’ statement in His sermon to the thousands is the doctrine of sin, of being dead in sin, of being so totally depraved that one can be saved by grace alone.

This doctrine was offensive to Jesus' hearers. The Jews of Jesus' day –like people of any generation– balked at the idea of having no life in themselves, gagged at the notion of being *dependent*. The Jews convinced themselves that there was sufficient life in them to earn some favour from the Almighty. So particular decisions were in *peoples'* courts, people can take initiative and bring about God's kingdom. For example, when the people of John 6 realised that Jesus was the prophet who was to come into the world (vs 14), they said that *they* should make Him King. *They* would appreciate Jesus for what He was, *they* would embrace Him. But now Jesus says to them: 'I am the bread of life, and that means that you are dead, you can do nothing to serve God, to appreciate Me, to save yourselves; if you want life you must eat Me, for I alone am the bread of life.' Again: 'you are lost, you are dead, you cannot come to Me unless the Father who sent Me *draw* you to Me.' With that one sharp sermon, Christ threw out the window every thought of self-worth that His audience had.

That's why they left. Jesus' word was too tough; it poked a hole in their sense of self. They couldn't handle that kind of doctrine, weren't comfortable to admit that they might themselves be totally dead, lost, hopeless. The doctrine of sin and depravity was fine to confess as a general truth, but to say it of the self, to admit that they could contribute no more to being moved than a sack of potatoes does – no, that was too much for them. So they left. With their feet they shouted their protest to these condemning words of the Rabbi of Nazareth. They were not about to admit that they were too dead to make anybody king, not about to admit that they personally needed the bread of life so desperately. They had no appetite for total, radical self-denial.

2. Why the challenge is focused

It was quite a change within the 24 hour span of our chapter. From a band of some 5,000 men, Jesus was left with a mere handful. The crowd had heard Jesus' sermon, and voted with their feet. There stands the once popular Rabbi now, deserted except for a small little group of disciples. What does Jesus do now? Warn the remainder not to follow the example of the rest? Get alarmed and so dull the sharpness of his message somewhat? Become apologetic and tell the remnant that He overstated His case a little?

None of it, beloved. The Lord now turns to His central body of disciples and addresses the twelve. And He becomes very concrete, very specific and personal: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" The challenge to follow or to go is *concentrated* upon each one of the twelve. What do you think, Peter? You see the 1000's disappearing. You don't want to go too, do you? Peter? You know what I've told you: you're dead, totally dead in sin, fully dependent on the Father's grace; not a thing you do can earn you points with God. You OK with that, Peter? Do you believe this total depravity concerning *yourself*?? Or do you find it offensive? Behold the others, they're all gone. They're happy enough to admit the general truth of depravity, but they don't want to get personal; they don't want to deny themselves. They are the majority, you are the minority. How about it Peter? Do you think the masses are right? Do you want to go too?

And you, Andrew, Matthew, Thaddeus? Will you confess your own personal deadness in sin, confess that you can't live through yourself because you have no life in you to begin with, no life at all? Will you deny yourself, empty yourself, sacrifice your inner urge to think that there's something you can do toward salvation? Or do you find it offensive, Andrew, Matthew, Thaddeus, that people can't make Me king, that people can't choose me, that you don't have any life in yourselves? What do you think, Andrew? Follow or go?

And how about you, congregation, older and younger? Are you offended by the implications of Jesus' sermon, offended by the word that *you* have no life in you, are by nature dead? Make no mistake: Jesus' challenge to the twelve is concentrated very concretely not only on the twelve; Christ

focuses it also upon you, each and every one of you, personally. For years you've heard the gospel. But what do you think of that very sensitive question of what the self is? Will you admit that you haven't a single thing to offer to God, that before Him your hands are totally, absolutely, completely empty? Are you actually OK with the first part of the Catechism, the section on Sin and Misery, OK with the notion that there is no life in you, that you're inclined to all evil, that you cannot come to God unless God act upon you, that you can't assist God in the least, can't even give your consent because you are so totally dead in sin? Or do you find that too damning of the self, too negative? Do I hear you say that it is too damning of the self, too negative?? It's the part of the Catechism you confess with reluctance?? Then why do you stay?! There are numerous others who used to follow Christ but over the years have deserted, also from our own midst; they've joined churches where you're not made to feel so down on yourself. *Are you offended at the point Jesus makes in John 6: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (vs 53)?* Dead in yourself?

Please don't skip over these questions lightly. Our land knows plenty of people who talk enthusiastically of Jesus Christ as their Saviour, but so many of them will have nothing to do with the teaching of our Lord in John 6. No life in you? Cannot come to Christ unless the Father drag you? Arminius rejected that teaching so many centuries ago, and as a result the church put together the *Canons of Dort*. This confession is not popular in North America, I know, but its insistence on Total Depravity and so on salvation by grace *alone* is the historic position of the Christian church – because that's the clear revelation of God in Scripture, including John 6.

Therefore, once again, brothers and sisters, older and younger alike: do you believe what the Lord says in John 6? Or do you too take offence at the Lord's sharp sermon, do you also conclude that "this is a hard teaching; who can accept it?" Do you too want to go and serve instead an easier Christ, one who says things nicer, one who is not so damning about the condition of human nature? You wish to join the majority of your country men in questioning the total deadness of each person? I tell you: there is but one thing to do then, and that is to go; you do not belong in a church that officially maintains the Canons of Dort. But be aware: then you've lost the wealth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. After all, why should Jesus then die for sin....

No, it's not that Jesus would drive anyone away. But He does not beg anyone to stay either. In our text Jesus did not take the sting out of His message in order to keep potential disciples. He saw the crowds disappear by the thousands, but did not take back a single word. He didn't, because the Head of the Church wishes to *gather* His church, and He does gather His church *through the proclamation of the only Word of the Father*. He does not water it down, He does not dull its sharpness, He does not reckon with what men want to hear. He says instead exactly how things are, for only the truth can make one free. So it is for each who would be saved to listen to that only Word, to accept it at face value, no matter how hard and damning that Word is on sinners. There is no room amongst the follower of Christ for pride in oneself. The choice is now as it was then: either follow or go, either admit that one has nothing in oneself or leave the church of Jesus Christ.

That brings us to our last point:

3. How the challenge is answered

We still find it hard to accept: is the Lord of the Church not too harsh in preaching a sermon as this, and then concentrating the challenge of His sermon so pointedly on the twelve? Is this not a recipe guaranteed to reduce Jesus' following to nothing? Is this *gospel* preaching?!

We have our questions. Yet we need to bear in mind, my brothers and sisters, that Christ – Head of the Church that He is – can lay such a challenge before His people, and yet not drive away from Himself and His Church any whom the Father has given to Him. It is most true that the natural man, one still dead in sin, is going to be offended when he hears that he actually is dead and cannot come to

Christ unless he is dragged there; such condemnation of the self runs against the grain. To hear a sermon as harsh as Jesus preached, damning as it is about human nature, yes, that will turn off a person who refuses to bend before the Word of God about our deadness in sin and our absolute need for Jesus Christ.

But the man of faith, he who has received from the Lord a new heart, who has been renewed by the Holy Spirit, he *knows* his own deadness, and he does not mind to admit his total dependence on Jesus Christ for salvation. He knows that apart from God there is no hope of ever being able to embrace Jesus as Saviour. In him there is no pride, and therefore he will not take offence at what the Lord says in this sermon of John 6. He may witness the sad development that many who followed Christ desert Him because of the doctrine of total depravity and salvation through grace alone. But the man of faith, the one who has received a new heart from the Lord, is not at all offended when he is asked to choose whether he will follow or go. He's not offended because he has already made a choice: before he professed his faith already he learned to admit his own lost-ness and his dependence upon God. So he can answer Jesus' question with Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." 'Lord, we have no life in ourselves, are by nature dead in sin. Only you are able to raise us to a new life. You are 'Jesus', the Saviour of the world. Unless in faith we eat Your flesh and drink Your blood, Lord, we have no life in us. *We need You*. Why then should we go?! And where would we go to? No, Lord, You have worked faith in our hearts, and so You have already raised us up to a new life, given us a new heart so that we could choose for you. So we'll stay with You, come what may.'

In a word: in the heart of such a person there is *humility*, there is *self-denial*. He knows that of himself he has *nothing*, he knows that everything he now has is *given* him by his Saviour, and so there is no thought any more of putting the self first, no thought of nursing one's self-esteem. He knows only one thing, and that is *Jesus*.

Was Christ's challenge then so very unwise, beloved? Too sharp and unfeeling? Not at all! The conclusion of the challenge that Christ brought upon His followers exposed what actually lived in the hearts of these admirers. *And that was Christ's intent*: expose what lived in the hearts of His admirers. That purpose Christ achieved with His hard sermon, that purpose Christ pursued also in that challenge directed to the twelve. And so it became clear why Christ was so popular. *His popularity in John 6 had nothing at all to do with faith in Him!*

That's what needs to be exposed in our day too, with you and with me. Why do we follow Christ? Why do we come to church? Is it because we know our own lostness, our need for *Him*? Or have we some other motive, as in: we want to earn points with God in order to enter His heaven? Or: going to church is simply the done thing in our family circle and I don't want to fall out with the family? Know it, beloved, know it: Jesus came only for those who know their sins and misery!

Blessed are you, beloved, if you take no offence at Christ's words. It is not flesh and blood that has revealed this truth to you, but the Father who is in heaven. And if He has revealed it, He will by no means hide His truth from you again. For then you have been raised to a newness of life in Christ Jesus. And the challenge of Christ's question will serve only to convince you of the greatness of the salvation we have received: God dragged me, dead though I was in sin, into His kingdom of life! What a privilege!