

Scripture:

John 6:56-69

“Hard teachings.”

Hard teachings.

Sometimes what Jesus said --- and did ----- who He was and is ----- all too easily get domesticated and watered down --- down played if not also dismissed in the process.

There has been an approach among some Christians in the last few years ---- ---- to share and describe Jesus in such a way that downplays His radical --- powerful ---- saving way.

Those of this mind set say ----- “Jesus was a teacher --- just like many other teachers.” --- noting particularly special in this regard.

---- “Jesus was a healer ---- just like many other healers.” ---- nothing particularly special or unique in this regard.

---- “He was a prophet --- in line with many other prophets of a similar nature --- Moses ---- Jeremiah --- Elijah --- and so on.” --- again nothing unique or special in this regard.

“He was a great human being --- capable of remarkable things.” --- just as many people are also great human also beings capable of great and remarkable things.

Some have even watered Him down to the point of saying He was a great human being capable of great things --- just as we are all capable of great things ----- saying yes He did amazing things but we too can do many of the very same amazing things He did.

We too are capable of much of what He did --- and before you know it ----- Jesus is seen as nobody unique or special --- a remarkable person for sure --- but one among many other remarkable people.

This approach of course --- if you take Christ seriously ---- is a mistake ---- a huge mistake to say the least ---- anathema even.

Downplaying the radical --- divine ----- transformative ----- saving nature of Jesus Christ --- sad ----- misguided ----- despicable even depending on the source.

Somehow many Christians have come to think that if we present Jesus as some kind of a regular guy --- one of us --- not all that remarkable --- but a regular Joe --- then more people will take to Him ----- more people will be open to hearing about Him.

Big mistake.

Many have lost the radical --- totally different from anything else in all creation --- reality of Jesus Christ.

They've watered Him down --- domesticated Him --- down played Him.

“Come meet Jesus --- He was a simple carpenter ---- a labourer --- from a small town --- humble beginnings --- just like many of us.” ----- they say.

Yes He had humble beginnings --- sort of anyway ---- it's kind of hard to claim humble beginnings when the Holy Spirit is involved --- yes He came from a small town --- and was reared as a carpenter.

But these aren't the individuating things about Him --- these aren't the things that define Him --- so why start there --- why emphasis them unnecessarily --- misguidingly?

It's refreshing to hear people speak of Christ ---- as all that He was and is --- - hinge point of humanity --- the greatest and most powerful and interesting human being who ever walked the earth ---- God incarnate ---- Saviour to all --- the one who changes lives for ever ----- and so on ----- all descriptions are only ever partial when it comes to Christ.

Forget about watering down ---- domesticating --- taming and down playing Christ ---- He's larger than life --- without peer or category --- and we ought to share Him in that very same way.

Jesus never bandied around using empty or rhetorical words --- beating around the bush --- soft soaping.

And so when we speak of Him we shouldn't either.

Mostly what Jesus spoke about mattered ----- it wasn't ever just idle chatter -
----- very often it was matters of life and death.

That's certainly what He spoke about in our reading from John's gospel this morning.

Picking it up at verse 56 ----

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

Not what you'd call water cooler chit chat ----- idle talk.

Life and death is what Jesus is talking about here --- and so often elsewhere -
-- if we really take His words seriously.

The context for our reading from John's gospel today is ----- Jesus had just finished feeding thousands on the hillside.

And He'd spent some time describing Himself as the bread of life.

Having enough food was a matter of life and death --- feeding the hungry on the hillside ----- eating the right food is also a matter of life and death --- Jesus as the bread of life.

Life and death is what Jesus is speaking about --- not just fancy cakes --- or tasty treats ---- or new found diets and recipes ----- that would be a watered down --- domesticated ---- down playing of Jesus Christ as the bread of life.

And the people --- including His followers are confused ---- and offended --- grumbling --- unable to accept this radical teaching ---- this radical Christ.

Beginning at verse 60 from John's gospel today ---

"On hearing it --- "it" meaning Jesus talking about Himself as the bread of life ----- many of his disciples said "This is hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

And then the next verse -----

“Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them
“Does this offend you?”

“Hard teaching” ---- the disciples say -----“Who can accept it?”

Jesus’ reply ----- “Does this offend you?”

And then as verse 66 indicates ----- “from this time many of his disciples
turned back and no longer followed him.”

And Jesus replies to this mass exodus saying in verse 67 --- “You do not
want to leave too, do you?”

“You do not want to leave too, do you?”

He doesn’t try to soft soap them into staying ----- or bid them to “hang in for
while longer will ya friends ---- it gets better ---- easier.”

No ----- his reply --- “you do not want to leave too, do you?”

A lot of what Jesus had to say was radical --- transformative ----- difficult
for people to hear --- counter culture --- going against the grain of all that
they thought they knew and had been taught.

Unfortunately because He has become so watered down --- and
domesticated ---- we can all too easily miss the beauty ----- and the power ---
and the challenge ---- of His words of life.

Part of what Jesus is saying in John’s gospel today is --- “If you ever want to
have a life that is in any way worth while you must enter into the life of the
Father through me ----- His Son.”

“If you ever want to have a life that is in any way worth while you must
enter into the life of the Father through me.”

Or --- more bluntly put ---- “Without me folks ---- your life will be nothing.”

What Jesus is offering here isn't just all the loaves and fishes He provided for those thousands of hungry people on the hillside --- a short term earthly sustenance.

What He's providing is far greater and lasting --- access to the Life of the Triune God --- eternal nourishment.

He's saying that union with Him through such things as participating in the Eucharist ----- communion with God --- allows and enables us to enter into the rhythms of Father --- Son and Holy Spirit ----- the Life that existed before time as we know it ---- creation ----- and carries on after time as we know it -- eternity.

It's all too easy to come to the meal ---- Eucharist --- Holy Communion ---- the Lord's Table ---- to come before God ---- such that our thoughts and impressions and expectations are small ----- rote --- it's standard procedure -- the minister says this and that and then we all eat bits of bread and take small little cups it's all very orderly --- God is there for me ho hum.

In truth we cannot exaggerate what we get from the meal --- and from the fact that God is always there for us.

In truth we cannot exaggerate all that Christ is.

Our imagination is not big enough ---- our sense of awe --- and openness to the wonder beauty mystery and power of Christ can all too easily become far too small.

What Jesus is offering is a slice of eternal life --- a way into eternal life --- oneness with God forever --- world without end.

Radical.

Difficult to wrap your head around.

Hard teachings.

Jesus isn't just about entertaining us.

Or simply filling us temporarily --- satisfying physical hunger --- or some kind of passing spiritual itch.

Instead He wants to enter into our very lives --- and us to enter into His very life.

He's not simply trying to impress us with cool thoughts or catchy ideas.

He's about far more than just this ----- He's all about transforming our lives --- saving us ---- creating whole new beings of us.

It's not just ---- improve yourself ---- make better decisions ---- be a good neighbour --- think of others --- emulate wise teachings --- it's far more than just this.

It's enter into the life of God ----- the Kingdom of heaven --- build it --- establish it --- live into it --- be one with it.

There are all kinds of hard teachings --- difficult passages in the Bible.

If we look at it closely there is nothing tame or simple or basic in the gospel --- it's radical ---- transformative ---- earth shattering --- it shakes things right down to the foundations ---- on a profound and deep level.

“Hard teaching” ---- the disciples say ---- “Who can accept it?”

“Does this offend you?” ---- Jesus replies.

And then after this ----- “from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

And Jesus' reply to His closest followers --- “You do not want to leave too, do you?”

“You do not want to leave too, do you?”

Following Christ is radical.

His teachings were off the charts --- different from anything the people had ever seen or even imagined.

It was a huge stretch of the mind --- and spirit --- and intellect to follow Him.

“Hard teaching!”

“Who can accept this?”

Offensive were Jesus’ teachings in relation to what people had come to understand.

It takes a nimble and flexible and very open mind to truly wrestle with the awesome and mysteriously powerful teachings of Christ.

Unfortunately too often He is domesticated and watered down into something far more approachable and simple and pleasant and sugar coated.

Anybody here remember the 1984 film “Places in the Heart”?

Places in the Heart ----- it starred Sally Field, John Malkovich, Ed Harris and Danny Glover ---- it’s set in the south in the 1930’s and is all about a widow trying to save her fledging cotton farm after the murder of her husband.

In the opening scene a young drunk black boy Wylie accidentally shoots sheriff Spalding to death.

Young Wylie is quickly lynched by the white townsfolk and Edna is left with a huge debt ---- big farm ----- and two young children to raise.

The local bank threatens foreclosure on the farm and Edna isn’t sure what she is going to do about things --- what does she know about farming.

And then along comes Moze ---- a black migrant farmer who happens to know a fair bit about how to grow and harvest cotton.

So Edna hires him ----- and so begins what turns out to be a successful bid to save her farm and her family.

Unfortunately many of the white townsfolk ---- some of them church goers and also members of the white militant supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan don't like the idea of Moze helping out ----- and so they get all dressed up in their Klan regalia and come out to the farm and beat Moze up and force him to flee.

And as Edna watches Moze leaving ----- the air is thick with questions.

“Will she be able to keep the farm --- and family afloat without Moze's help?”

“What will become of Moze?”

“Why must people be so heartless and prejudice?”

“Where is the justice in this?”

“It just isn't right --- he --- and she ---- did the right thing and look what happened?”

“People can be so cruel --- why do these cruel ones prosper?”

And it almost feels like the movie is going to end --- all frayed and open ended ---- with a frustratingly bad and unfortunate taste left in your mouth.

But there is one last scene ---- in the town church.

It's Sunday morning and the pastor reads from 1 Corinthians 13 --- about the radical nature of love in Jesus Christ ---- and after the preacher says a few words ----- communion is served.

And this is where the powerful --- transformational ----- hard teachings of Christ stand tall.

The church is pretty full ---- throughout the movie scenes in the church were often one's of only a half full church ---- but today it's different everyone is there ---- **everyone** as we soon see.

And everyone was there because as the bread and wine pass we see a woman there who had died in a tornado earlier in the movie.

The town prostitute is there too --- an outsider --- despised by many.

Along with the dead woman --- the town prostitute --- we find the town banker who wasn't all that graceful or Christlike in the face of Mrs. Spalding's disaster on account of her husband's death.

And then there are the members of the KKK --- so called good and God fearin' folk ----- all taking the Lord's Supper together.

And not only this ---- but as they pass the trays along ---- they pass them to Moze the man they so despised and treated in anything but a Christlike way.

And then finally Edna takes the bread and passes it to her husband who is sitting next to her once again.

And then next to him is Wylie ---- the boy who killed Edna's husband -----
---- Sheriff Spalding ----- in the opening scene.

And as Sheriff Spalding and Wylie eat the bread they look at each other and say ---- "the peace of God" ---- and the movie ends.

Powerful scene.

This final scene is an expression of the eternal life and fellowship that Jesus speaks of today in our passage.

And the final scene is an expression of the hard teachings of Christ.

Hard for some in the church to realize that all are welcome --- regardless of cultural heritage --- colour of skin ---- regardless of gender ---- occupation --
--- sins committed and so on --- regardless of these ----- and because of Christ ---- the radical loving saving compassionate nature of Christ ----- all are welcome.

The Sacrament ---- the bread of life that Jesus talks about in our passage today ----- is truly this amazing and powerful and transformative.

The reality of the gospel --- God's will in Jesus Christ ----- is as amazing and powerful and transformative as all these disparate people sitting together in Christ and sharing in the bread of life.

Having the benefits of forgiveness ---- inclusiveness --- love ---- peace ---- salvation ----- eternal life --- conferred upon us by Christ Himself ---- is something that should drive us beyond any prejudice --- pride ---- caution --- preconceptions ---- and restriction --- any and everything ----- that might cause us to water down the powerful reality of the gospel.

Jesus was point blank brutally honest.

So much so that some of His teachings were hard to understand.

“Hard teaching” ---- the disciples say ----- “Who can accept it?”

“Does this offend you?” ---- Jesus replies.

“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” ---- Jesus says.

We need to reclaim the transformative awe of Jesus Christ ----- and get away from some of the sappy ---- great guy ----- good ole pal Christ.

Over the next 10 or so months from time to time I'm going to make a point of tackling some of the hard teachings of the Bible --- some of the hard teachings of Christ --- unapologetically and faithfully.

Perhaps we'll be left with more questions than answers ---- kind of like the disciples in our reading from John's gospel today ----- who knows ---- but we'll look at them head on.

Hard teachings.

Jesus has some.

Sometimes He confronts us with things we don't want to hear --- or things about ourselves that we don't like --- or didn't even know were even there in

the first place --- prejudices and secret agendas and other such things that hold us back and hinder the gospel.

Jesus is unlike any other person who ever walked the earth.

And some of His teachings are difficult to wrap our heads around --- but they are there ----- and we are His --- and they confront us.

Hopefully --- when we come to them and Jesus says things like ---- “You do not want to leave too, do you?” --- as He does in John’s gospel today --- verse 67 ---- we have the faith and patience to stick around and listen and learn and grow in Him.

Hard teachings ----- yes sometimes ---- but harder still the heart that isn’t even open to them.

Amen.