

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity  
Sunday 25 August 2024  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sermon by the Venerable Vanessa Herrick

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Joshua 24.1-2a, 14-18  
Ephesians 6.10-20  
John 6.56-69

*“So, Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”*

It’s nearly twenty-five years since I last regularly preached from this pulpit. One or two of you may remember! But as I look back over twenty-eight years of ordained ministry, and forty plus years of preaching, I have a certain empathy with Peter (and those other eleven apostles).

*‘Do you also wish to go away?’*

If I’m honest about my Christian journey, there’ve been times when I’ve almost wanted to reply, Yes.

But I haven’t.

Today’s Gospel reading sees us reaching the end of John’s Gospel chapter 6 (some might say, at last!) Personally, I think it’s one of the most complex and challenging chapters in the whole of the New Testament.

It begins with the narrative of the Feeding of the Five Thousand; includes Jesus’ teaching about himself as the Bread of Life; and – as Dean Joe pointed out last week – by the end, leaves Jesus’ hearers shocked and horrified at his invitation to ‘eat his flesh’ and ‘drink his blood’. No wonder, as we read in verse 66, *“Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”*

But what this passage and, indeed, this morning’s Old Testament reading from the book of Joshua, tell us is that the Christian faith journey is tough.

It sometimes doesn’t make sense.

It can often leave us puzzled.

Sometimes shocked.

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And all of us – all of us – can be tempted to give up trying, to walk away from Jesus, to turn our backs on him, to try out other avenues of belief, to say (along with those first hearers of Jesus), *“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”*

And Jesus asks us, as he asked the twelve:

*‘Do you also wish to go away?’*

So, what is it that makes it so hard sometimes?

Well, if we’re honest, there are many pressures which might persuade us to turn away.....

Sometimes – as here in John 6 – it’s the apparently strange teaching of the Bible and the way in which it’s interpreted. The current painful and divisive conversations about human sexuality within the life of the Church of England, and the recent actions of those who say they want to remain within it but see themselves as unable to remain under the authority of the House of Bishops, is but one example.

Sometimes, it’s the simple pressures of living. How will I manage this winter when the price of energy is going up, the cost of living seems never to go down, my pension may be taxed and they’re taking away my winter fuel payment?

Sometimes, it’s that sheer sense of despondency and disbelief when we look at the state the world is in, with riots on our streets, prisons overflowing, hospitals and GPs buckling under impossible strain, the planet over-heating at an alarming rate and scores and thousands continuing to suffer and die in Gaza, on the West Bank, in Sudan, in Ukraine, in Myanmar.

*‘Do you also wish to go away?’*

Well, sometimes, God, the answer is, Yes!

And we have to acknowledge that many people in the Church *have* ‘gone away’: some because of Covid; some because of the financial strains on the Church; some because there are just now not enough volunteers or priests to go round; some because they’re no longer convinced by the strategic direction which the Church is taking.

But no one said it would be easy. No one said that being a follower of Jesus Christ would mean an end to pressure or suffering or despair or the costliness of seeing others in pain. No one said we’d

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sail through life with ease. No one said we wouldn't *ourselves* have to face suffering, or want, or the darkest of days in grief or seeming hopelessness.

But on that day when Jesus said some difficult things to the crowd, Peter discerned something important. When others walked away and Jesus was left alone with those who were closest to him, it was Peter who saw through Jesus' penetrating question and challenging words. He said this:

*"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

There was something in Peter that kept him, and all but one of those apostles, *with* Jesus – even though he would, later, go on to deny him, run away from the crucifixion and, after the resurrection, struggle to hear Jesus words on the lakeside, 'Do you love me?' Peter knew in his heart that Jesus was the One who would carry him through, love him forever and, ultimately, save him.

All of us live with different pressures.

All of us have to make choices.

All of us struggle sometimes to make sense of our faith and make sense of our world.

During those twenty-five years since I last preached here, there've been times when I've wondered how to make sense of it all:

- when a College student committed suicide and, as Chaplain, I had to take his funeral;
- when the colleague who had fought so long with cancer finally succumbed to that dreadful disease;
- when members of the worshipping community complained that I was being 'too political' from the pulpit;
- when one of my congregations vetoed services because I suggested some small liturgical changes that might make them more accessible to visitors;
- when I suffered illness and exhaustion and had to take six weeks off work.

You will have your own examples. Your own stories. Your own times when your answer to Jesus' question, '*Do you also wish to go away?*', might have been a longing to say, Yes.

But you're here. And so are all of us.

Because what we, and all who are drawn to Jesus, need is not 'intellectual proof', 'perfect lives' or an absence of questions. What we, and the whole of humanity, need is Love. God's Love.

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And by God's grace, our shared Love.

Shared with one another in this Cathedral community.

And shared with a suffering and sometimes hopeless world.

Because although we may abandon God, he will never – absolutely never – abandon us.

His love is constant.

His embrace is secure – even when we don't feel it.

And his gracious Holy Spirit lives within us always, helping us to discern, with Peter, what it *really* means to receive the flesh and blood of Christ, both in bread and wine *and* in the much broader sense of receiving the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection and of abiding, spiritually, day by day, in him.

It is the *Spirit* who enables us, who has enabled *me* over those twenty-five years, not to go away but to say, with Peter:

*"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

For we have been given a 'manna' which does not decay; a Bread which goes on satisfying; a Blood which is the ever-flowing Source of Life to those who receive it and which flows, by God's Spirit, in us and through us to the world around, transforming, renewing and enlivening as it goes, and drawing us all back to the One whose love and sacrifice on the cross made it all possible.

*'Do you also wish to go away?'*

By God's gift of the Spirit and his unending grace, we can say, No.

And so, we turn again to the altar of Hope and Love, humbly offering ourselves, to be nurtured, sustained, fed and filled – equipped to be his people in the world.

The seventeenth century poet, George Herbert, knew it for himself. Conscious of his own unworthiness, wanting to reject Love's invitation and to 'go away', he wrote this:

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*“And know you not,’ says Love, ‘Who bore the blame?’  
‘My dear, then I will serve.’  
‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’  
So I did sit and eat.”*