**John 6:56-69**

**How to persevere in the faith when times get tough**

How often have you engaged with friends and family in philosophical or theological conversations about God? Loads of times, I’m sure…

The topic of ‘God’ is one that people rarely seem to tire of talking about in abstract terms: issues like, “How can you believe in God when science produces so much evidence to the contrary?” or “If God exists, why is there so much suffering in the world?” or “How can you believe God made the world in 6 days?” or maybe, “Christianity is just a crutch; a fairy tale for weak people to prop them up in life”.

These are the sorts of conversations that many people seem to enjoy having and, of course, no answers are ever reached and we are left feeling frustrated by it all. People love engaging in philosophical and theological debate about the concept of God.

But have you tried changing the conversation? Then it all gets very different…If you stop talking about God as a concept and start talking about Jesus as your Lord and Saviour with whom you have a living relationship – the person Jesus with whom you are in love – all of a sudden the atmosphere changes and people clam up and stop talking. Because they suddenly realize they are in the presence of a religious zealot who doesn’t want to talk about the concept of God in the abstract but the reality of Jesus as a living presence in their lives.

Keep God ‘out there’ as a concept – they are happy to talk. But bring Jesus ‘in here’ as a personal relationship – they don’t want to know any more. Because the truth is that, for many people, Jesus as a person with whom to have a relationship is a step too far: he is a real threat to many.

Many people are tempted to give up the faith rather than persevere when there is too much challenge involved in remaining a Christian. There’s nothing new in this, of course: we see the same story time and time again in the Gospels. The religious people of Jesus’ day felt comfortable in their way of doing religion but Jesus comes along and, literally and metaphorically, turns the tables over in the Temple and he is considered a threat and a challenge that needs to be eliminated.

And the same was true for other people too, as we heard in this reading from John. In verse 60, we heard, ‘When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”’ Jesus drew the crowds – everybody loved to come out and hear this radical teacher, they loved to hear his stories, to see him challenge the religious authorities, they were excited to see him perform miracles. But sometimes his teaching got a little close to the bone, when he started challenging them about their own personal lifestyles and it was at that point that people started complaining and many were tempted to give up following him. As we read in verse 66, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

For some people, Jesus is too much of a challenge…he is a threat to our way of life, he is a threat to all that we think we know, he is a threat to our grip on reality and our freedom to live for ourselves.

But not everyone responded to Jesus in the same way. Everyone heard the same teaching, everyone knew the same Jesus - but some people responded to him very differently. Verse 67: ‘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. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”’

Some people left Jesus, others stayed.

So why the difference? And most importantly for us, what is the incentive for us to continue strong in the faith rather than be tempted to give up?

I think there’s 3 things to say…

**1. We must not rely on our own understanding**

It’s tempting to think that the disciples who stayed with Jesus were the ones who understood who he was and what he was going to achieve by dying for us on the cross. So they stayed with him because of their deep theological understanding whereas those who walked away didn’t have that depth of understanding. But that’s just not true…

The disciples who stayed with Jesus had no deeper understanding about him than anyone else. Time and time again in the Gospels, we are reminded that the disciples didn’t understand: they hadn’t worked out who Jesus was, they misinterpreted his parables, they didn’t get why he was healing people, they tried to prevent him from going to Jerusalem to be crucified. The disciples who stayed with him did not understand him: they didn’t have a secret bank of knowledge that was unavailable to everyone else.

They didn’t rely on their understanding and knowledge but instead, they were intrigued by Jesus and intrigued to know where he would take them. When Jesus asked if they were going to leave, Peter said, “Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life…”

There’s something quite in Peter’s reply that isn’t too serious, I think: I imagine he had a little wry smile, and sensed the irony of what he was saying.

And maybe the same is true of us too: we are driven on in our discipleship, not through any great depth of understanding. But Jesus has us intrigued - and we are intrigued to know how a life spent following him might pan out. And we know, deep inside, that there is no life better than that of following Jesus and that, if we gave up now, we would miss him too much…

So how do we persevere as a Christian and not give up? Firstly, we sit lightly to our lack of knowledge and we recognize that our discipleship is based more on the fact that we are intrigued by the journey, fascinated by the adventure of following Jesus and living out our lives in the context of a church community.

And the second point, I think is related to this:

**2. We need to engage with the playfulness of the Christian faith**

Too often, Christianity is presented to the world as a list of Do’s and Don’ts: rules to live by. Christianity is a very serious thing and we don’t seem to have too much fun as Christians.

But actually, I think there is a lot of playfulness in following Jesus: after all, being a Christian is not about believing doctrines so much as living in a loving relationship with God and all loving relationships have a large element of playfulness about them.

And as serious as Jesus’ teaching is here, there is still an element of playfulness about what he has to say…

I preached on part of this passage a few months ago and I don’t want to spend time going over what I said before: you’ll find the sermon on the website if you want to read it…I’m thinking about in verse 57, where Jesus says, “whoever eats me will live because of me.” And if you remember from last time we looked at this verse, Jesus doesn’t use the usual Greek word for ‘eat’ here: instead, he uses the word for ‘to gnaw a bone’ as if he is describing us participating in Holy Communion like a pack of wolves descending on its prey or a hungry child devouring a chicken leg from KFC.

We can’t tame this saying from Jesus: he is being deliberately playful in getting us to think about what Holy Communion means to us by using a really unusual phrase that challenges all our preconceptions about what we are doing when we receive the bread and wine. And he knows that he is being deliberately provocative because he says in verse 61: “Does this offend you?”

Of course it offends us! It is a scandalous comment to make because it challenges our sense of order and propriety…Jesus is being deliberately playful in getting us to think differently about theology and our understanding of God.

I think that, if people are tempted to give up following Jesus and dedicating themselves to the church family, it is often because they feel stifled by the rules and regulations they need to follow and fed up with not being allowed to do free-thinking and ask the difficult questions. Instead, too often, they are told what to believe and if they don’t believe what they are told, then their commitment to God is questioned.

But the Christian faith is a playful thing: our relationship with God is based on play. And we mustn’t be afraid to ask the difficult questions or to experiment with our practices or to engage creatively with God.

So, how do we persevere in the faith if we are tempted to give up? Firstly, we mustn’t rely on our own understanding. Secondly, we must engage with the playfulness of faith. And thirdly and finally…

**3. We must make a commitment to Jesus the person, not to abstract doctrines**

At some point, if you haven’t done so already, you need to make a decision: are you going to give your life over to God and follow him or not? At some point for all of us, the decision needs to be made.

We might think, “I need to have deeper understanding before I commit” or, “I just need to get through this problem in my life before I commit” or, “I’ll wait until the kids are at school and I have a bit more time before I commit”. But the truth is simple, isn’t it? None of us will ever have enough knowledge to make a truly informed choice. None of us will have a ‘problem free’ period of our lives. None of us have ‘enough time’ without any distractions. There will never be a better or easier time than ‘Now’ to commit to following Jesus.

And the commitment isn’t a commitment to a set of ideas or beliefs or doctrines or concepts. The commitment is to a loving relationship with a living person: Jesus Christ.

And that’s why there is no better time to commit than now - because we can’t put love off in such a rational way: love is what it is, and love finds us at any time and in any place; even here, this morning…

And we learn to love God because we realize that he has first loved us and so our love for him is a response to his unconditional, unending love for us.

Love is a beautiful thing and, if we truly love, we will persevere and we will endure all things.

There are times in our lives when we are tempted to give up the faith and to pursue another way. But for those who have experienced something of God in their lives, that really isn’t an option: as Peter says in this passage, “Where would we go?” No, when times get tough and we are tempted to give up the faith we are instead to persevere. How do we do that? By engaging with these 3 principles:

Don’t rely on your understanding: instead, try to feel God, to experience him.

Engage with the playfulness of a relationship with God: keep it creative and life-giving.

Make a commitment to follow Jesus: there really is no other option.

Jesus said, “I have come so that you may have life in all its fullness”. That is God’s promise to us. Sometimes, it can be hard work following Jesus, especially when times are tough or when we go through periods of doubt. But God loves each one of us with an everlasting love and our only response to that must surely be to love him back and keep loving him. In that way, and only in that way, can we know true fulfillment and real fullness of life.