Turning and Trusting
John 6:60-71

We're looking at John's gospel and at what follows Jesus feeding the 5000. And that event has caused quite the stir - or at least, what Jesus has to say afterwards has caused quite a stir. Because he says that as great as that miracle was, it was just a sign pointing to the fact that you and I have a hunger deeper than for food. We're hungry for eternity, and he's the one who can fill it. He's the one who can give you life.

And last week we saw the synagogue leaders take exception at that - but in today's passage what becomes clear is that they're not alone.

So we're going to look at 3 things: firstly, turning away, and why people turn away from Christ; secondly, thinking differently - and what you need to consider before walking away; and thirdly, instead of turning away, the One you should turn to.

Turning Away
Look at v66-67, 'After this *many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him*. So Jesus said to the Twelve…'

So there is a group of Jesus' disciples, seemingly a large group, who are quitting on him; who are saying, v60, "This is a hard saying: who can listen to it?" and, v61, who 'were grumbling.' But they're clearly not the Twelve disciples. They're people who followed Jesus and were close enough to him to be called his disciples, close enough to be invested, close enough, as Jesus says in v61, to "take offence."

But what are they taking offence at? Why are they quitting on him? Because it's not Jesus' character is it? It's his words. It's his teaching. Verse 60 again, "This is a hard saying."

Ok but which saying? Because in the last 30 or so verses that we've been looking at over the past few weeks, there's more than one candidate for something Jesus says that's hard to swallow, isn't there? That he calls God his Father? That he says that he's the One, and only one, who can meet our deepest longings? That no-one can come to him unless the Father draws him? That he has come from heaven - when everyone knows he's come from Capernaum and before that Nazareth? I mean, which one?

And read the gospels and you cannot escape the beauty of Jesus' *character*, but neither can you escape what he says, what he claims about himself. In fact, what he says is frequently as hard as a brick wall that you keep running into.

Now, John doesn't tell us explicitly which saying it was, but given the way Jesus prefixes one of his recent sayings, I suspect it's v53: 'So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you [which always means, 'you are not going to like this, you are going to find this hard!'] unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."'

That's hard. But why is it hard? Why is anything that Jesus says, or that we might read in the rest of the Bible hard? You see, the Greek word John uses for *hard* is *skleros*. It's a word you've probably heard, as in athero*sklerosis*, hardening of the arteries. But take that picture, and ask yourself: could it be that it's not so much the saying that's hard, as their hearts?

You see, there are multiple reasons why someone then or now might turn away from Christ; why someone might start coming to church, and show some interest for a while, but then stop, and you don't see them again; or why someone who has given every appearance of being a Christian starts to deconstruct their faith, and before you know it that faith is nowhere to be seen. Maybe they never get rooted into community; maybe they feel hurt by the community - or the pastor; maybe they're overtaken by some sin. And when it happens to someone you care about - it's not just hard, it hurts. And there's no one reason why people do it.

But one reason does keep recurring, and it's that they find something Jesus says, or something the Bible teaches, too hard to swallow, *because* it's confronting them, it's challenging them in a way they don't appreciate. It may be what Jesus or the Bible teaches on sexuality, or who you should or shouldn't marry. It may be on your ultimate allegiance being to Christ, not some political party or candidate. It might be on the authority of the Bible in our lives and the way we're to live our lives.

And is the teaching hard or is the harder thing to give Christ the most important place in our life? To let him reign, and not yourself, or your feelings, or opinions. So the teaching is hard when it collides with our hearts.

Ok, so look at this group as they turn away. Why are they stumbling over the need to feed on Christ's flesh and drink his blood? Why is that offensive to them? Well, firstly, it sounded just as gross then as it does now. But only if you misunderstand what Christ is saying. And making sure we're not getting offended by something the Bible is *not* saying is just as crucial as understanding what it is saying. And so, secondly, what he *is* saying is that they need to come to him for life. That they cannot find life by looking inside themselves, or by looking outside themselves to something other than him.

But that's no less hard to swallow today than it was then, is it? Because we want to decide where we look and find satisfaction in life.

But Jesus also points to another reason why someone might turn away. And Judas is the prime example. Verses 70-71, 'Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.'

In his book, *A Secular Age*, the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes our current age as 'disenchanted'. Things that used to be charged with meaning, with a sense of transcendence, have been emptied of any sense of another world, or of a reality beyond this world. And if that's true of anything, it's most certainly true of the idea of a real, personal devil. And what for most people just a hundred years ago would have seemed obviously true, that evil is real *and personal*, and locked in combat with God and with good, that idea of evil is now considered primitive and implausible at best, and downright harmful at worst.

Ok, but then how do you explain what's wrong with the world? If you're from a conservative bent, you'll have to say mankind is the problem, and if people simply obeyed the rules all would be well; while if you're from a progressive bent you'll say that man is fundamentally good and the problem is structural, and what's needed is education, or re-education, and the destruction of those oppressive structures.

Now obviously that's a gross over-simplification, but do either of those approaches really do justice to what you see going on in the world?

You see, the Bible says 'yes' to man being the problem and 'yes' to the fact that structures can be oppressive. But it says much more. And it's not that God is good and everything else is neutral. It's that God is good and that we live in a world where there are supra-human, supra-structural powers that are not good. That are real and dark and want to drag people down with them?

In other words, you and I don't live in an uncontested world. And the apostle Paul says that the battle between good and evil, is not ultimately waged on a literal physical battlefield with guns and rockets, and the good guys v's the bad guys, it's waged in our hearts and minds. It's a battle at the level of ideas: 'For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God' (2 Cor 10:4-5).

Where does he get that idea from? Well, in Jesus' parable of the sower, Jesus describes a farmer going out to sow seed - and the seed is the message of the gospel. But some of that seed falls on the path, and what happens to it? Birds come and eat it. But what reality is Jesus describing with that picture? Well, he tells us, 'The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.' (Mark 4:14-15.)

Now, Jesus is not a nut job, is he? He understands human nature better than any one, on the right or the left. And he's saying that when it comes to him and his teaching, we do not live, and we are not listening or learning, in an uncontested realm.

What has any of that got to do with you? Well, maybe you're not yet a Christian, and either now or in the future you find yourself reading something in the Bible and like these disciples you find it hard, and you're in danger of taking offence at it, and turning away. So be aware in that moment that this world is not neutral, and the battle for life is real.

Or maybe it's not you who's turning away, it's someone you care about it. And if that's the case, I would say, 'remember the thief on the cross.'

Because in what were literally the last moments of his life, a life he had screwed up, that man came to faith in Christ. But if you look at him closely, he knows way more than you would think he should. He understands the fear of God - as he cries out to his colleague in crime: 'do you not fear God?' He understands that he's getting his just desserts - 'We are receiving the due reward for our deeds'. But he also realises that Jesus is not, that he's innocent - 'but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he sees that Christ must be the king of the heavenly kingdom - 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

But where's he learnt any of that? And how does he connect his guilt and Jesus's innocence, with Jesus being the king, and him entering Messiah's kingdom? Maybe from what his parents told him when he was a child. Maybe through the Bible stories or Bible teaching he had heard at school or synagogue before he went off the rails. Like Isaiah 53, 'He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us

peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned - every one - to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' (Is 53:4-6).

And in the moment of his death, in extremis, it all becomes clear, all that he'd previously heard and learnt, falls into place: 'You're the King, you're dying for me' and Jesus welcomes him home: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.'

So if someone you love has turned away, don't give up hope. The powers of evil are real, but the power of God is even more so. And against all the odds can draw people to himself. So keep praying for them.

But maybe it's you, as a Christian, who is struggling over something that's hard. Well, take that to Christ as well. Look at v61: 'Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them…' So Jesus already knows our doubts. So don't let them fester in the dark, bring them to him in the light. Talk to him, and maybe to a friend about them.

And as you do, protect your heart.

Thinking Differently

Look what Jesus says in v61-62: '"Do you take offence at this? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

Now in the Book of Job, a book in the Old Testament, Job is a good man, to whom bad things happen. And he finds that seriously hard. And he knows, despite everything his friends say, that he does not deserve this, and yet God has let it happen. And like these guys, Job is in danger of taking offence at God. But in response, God overwhelms Job with question after question about the natural world. About what God knows and Job does not. Why? To bring home to Job, and to us, that God knows infinitely more than we do: 'Job, might there be reasons for me allowing this to happen to you, that you know nothing about?'

And it's as if here Jesus does the same here. 'You are struggling over my teaching and it's offensive to you. But what if I know something you do not know? What if something were to happen in the future, that at the moment you have no idea of, but that will totally change the way you see what I am saying?'

What if they were to see his body broken on the cross? What if they were to see his blood dripping on that cross? And what if three days later they saw him rise from the dead? And 40 days later, ascend to heaven?

If in the future they realised what the thief on the cross realised, that Jesus suffered and died in their place, would it change the way they saw his body and his blood, and what he meant by feeding on him, and receiving life from him? Would it change the way they saw him?

You see, in the previous passage Jesus spoke of his coming down from heaven, but now he's talking of "The Son of Man ascending to where he was before." And in Daniel 7, Daniel sees a vision of a heavenly figure - *one like a Son of Man* - approaching the throne of God, and being given power and dominion over every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Jesus is saying, what if the day comes when you realise I am that Son of Man? Would that change their response?

But that's not how they're currently seeing him, is it? They see him as Jesus *the man*, not Jesus the Son of Man. They're thinking he's just another religious leader who's said something culturally unacceptable, whose words they can reject as they like.

But in doing so they're seeing him in purely human terms. As Jesus says in v63, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all." You see Christ's body broken, and his blood shed, is no help to you, unless you see him for who he really is, and you put your faith in him.

But to do that, you need the Spirit of God to open your eyes. But they're not availing themselves of that help: v64, "But there are some of you who do not believe." You see, Jesus says in v63, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." And you can hear his words, and in response lift up your eyes and see him as the One come from heaven *for you*, the one dying *for you*, the one raised from the dead *for you*, and the one ascended back into heaven and interceding *for you*. Or, you can close your heart to his words, and lock it hard and fast, and rather than look up, keep looking down.

At the climax of *The Last Battle*, the last of CS Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia,* everyone who loves Aslan the Lion is entering Aslan's land. Except the dwarfs, who are sat in a huddle on the ground, telling each other don't open your eyes, don't be deceived, people are just trying to trick you. But that determination not to be taken in robs them of the feast that's put in front of them, and the life that's on offer to them. They refuse to look and to believe.

So you can come here on a Sunday and listen and sing; you can go to a Bible study and study the Bible, but unless you come with an open heart, to be taught by his Spirit, to combine it with faith, to look and believe, his words won't be life to you. But if you do come with an open heart, they will be life to you.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, and you're struggling over who Jesus is, or something the Bible says, before you walk away, Jesus' question to you is the same as it was to them: "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" And have you grappled, not just at a superficial level, but at a serious level with the evidence for Christ's resurrection and ascension, evidence that might just change your view on who he is?

And if you are a Christian, but your doubts, or objections, are neutralising your joy, and sure you're not leaving the faith but neither are you experiencing the joy of the faith, have you reckoned with the truth of Christ's resurrection and ascension? Because that also has the power to radically change the way you see things.

Tom and I have often spoken together about what keeps us in the faith when we're struggling, or what we come back to when we're doubting. And there are lots of things, but for both of us, the thing our feet land on, time and time again, the bedrock, is the resurrection of Christ. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he died, and three days later he really, really rose from the dead.

And when that truth collides with your heart, when the Spirit takes that truth, and applies it to your heart, it changes everything. It tells you that in the darkest of moments there is hope. It tells you that in a crowd of voices there is One whose word you should listen to. The One who has loving authority over your life. And that instead of being paralysed by doubt, instead of being neutralised by taking offence, there is One you can trust. And joy comes as you do.

The One You Should Turn To.
Verses 66-67: 'After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"'

You can imagine the scene, can't you. The Twelve are watching as people physically turn their backs on Jesus, and on them, and begin walking away. How would that have made you feel? Sad, at the friends you're losing? But might it also have left you doubting your decision to stay?

Well, Jesus understands that. It's why he asks them the question: do you want to go away as well? And you could read that as Jesus being desperate, 'tell me you're not going to leave me as well.' But that's not what he's saying. Firstly, the way John records this in Greek tells you that Jesus is expecting the answer 'no'. He's saying, 'you're not going, are you.' It's a statement more than a question.

But secondly, back in v64, John told us, 'For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe.' So none of this is taking Jesus by surprise. He already knows who will leave and who will not. So he's not asking because he's needy, he's asking for their sake - to bring them to the point of decision, to have them verbalise what they're struggling to articulate, to let them see for themselves who it is *they're* trusting.

Verses 67-69: '"Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."'

Notice what Peter *doesn't* say. Because he makes no mention of eating flesh or drinking blood. Why not? Because he and the others probably have no more clue what Jesus is talking about anymore than those whose backs they now see disappearing into the distance. But what they do know is Christ. They may not know everything, but they know enough to trust him.

And you and I may never have all our questions answered, but that's not the question. The question is, do you trust him? The question's the same as Peter's question: 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' And so think of the beauty of Christ's character. Think of the way he brings down the proud and lifts up the humble. Think of his love for a rich young man whose life is lost in love of stuff. Think of his tenderness and firmness to a woman caught in adultery. Think of him sitting on the deathbed of a young girl, calling her back to life. Think of his words - words that can heal a leper - 'Be clean' , words that can still a storm, or cast out a demon, words, as Peter says here, that overflow with eternal life. And think of his death - in your place, for you sin. Think of his resurrection, that forever breaks the power of death and sin. And ask yourself - where else are you going to go?

Will you go to the intellectual barrenness of atheism? Or the moral ambiguity of Buddhism, that smiles indifferently in the face of suffering? Will you turn to the latest self-help guru making a nice little earning from people longing for life - and choose them over Christ? Or will you turn inwards and think that you have the words of life?

Or like Peter, will you turn to the One person who has mastered life, and death, and trust him?

So if you're not yet a Christian and you're tempted to walk away. Don't. Jesus is no more, or less, controversial than he was back then. And none of us are living in a spiritually neutral environment - and the battleground is the ground of your heart. So don't surrender to the dark.

And if you are a Christian, but your doubts feel overwhelming, look up. Think deeply and seriously about his resurrection and ascension, and in your heart turn to him, and trust him. And his words will be life to you.