

**Trinity XIII, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

**Josh 24@1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:46-59**

*Do you also want to go away?*

What a fateful moment it was, all the people of Israel gathered in their ranks that morning. Stood at last in their new land – after the Exodus, after the war to establish themselves in Canaan. Something like peace had at last arrived. And their leader Joshua summons them for his final speech.

And his message is that peace brings danger. At least in war, people had been clear whose side they were on, who their friends were and who their God was. Peace would bring temptation. Israel could just settle down and blend in. Worship the Gods of the Amorites in whose land you're living, have your children marry their children, become one people with them. When in Canaan, do as the Canaanites do. Yes, Serve YHWH, but serve Him as one god amongst others. You don't need to always be fighting, you don't need to always be different. Settle down. Blend in.

And then the people answered: Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. We will serve him alone.

And thus starts the rest of the Old Testament. Stories of the pressure on the Jews to settle down and blend in – about their struggles not to, and the disasters which happen when they do. Some are noble: Daniel bound in the lions' den, because he will not bow down with the rest and worship the king. Some are heartbreaking: Ezra and Nehemiah forcibly breaking up marriages between Jews and Gentiles to restore the people's purity. Some seems petty: you don't wear this kind of fabric, you don't eat that kind of food, you wash in this kind of way. Why? Because you're Jews, and you're different. You're a people that dwells alone. Don't settle down, don't blend in.

Now, it's tempting to imagine that this was all a great big mistake, which the New Testament puts right. In Christ, says St. Paul, there is no Jew or Gentile. Neither circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything: we're all one in Christ Jesus. God's people will be drawn from every people, tribe, language, nation and tongue. No more divisions: we are one family.

But this is only half right. Because the New Testament, speaking to Christians, pretty much repeats Joshua's warning. Don't you know there's a war on, says St. Paul in Ephesians 6? Get your armour on. There are hordes of enemies massed against you: rulers, authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. They want to beat you down. They want you to settle down and blend in, to become good little Roman citizens. Sometimes they will use swords. Sometimes they will prefer subtlety or sneers: but they always want the same thing: People of God - settle down, blend in.

It's there in the Gospel too. Many of the disciples, we're told, turned back and no longer went about with Jesus. They couldn't accept what He said - that it wasn't enough just to be a good person, to follow God - no, you somehow had to accept and believe and live the truth that he, Jesus, was the very centre of your life. That He, bluntly, was like God. That was bad enough, but it gets worse: you had to eat his flesh, and drink his blood. It sounded horrid; it sounded mad. Even if he wasn't actually teaching cannibalism, it still reeked of suffering and death and of someone not quite right in the head. Perhaps he was not the Messiah after all. Better to leave him. Come back out of the wilderness. Blend back into the world. And so Jesus asks Peter and the rest, 'and you, also? Do you also wish to go away?'

And a large part of Peter must have wanted to say: 'frankly, yes.' That would have been easier. He didn't really understand what Jesus was on about either. He was as confused and baffled as the rest of them. But - he knew Jesus. He knew Jesus and he knew his own heart, and he knew that even though it was all overwhelming and strange, there was something in Jesus he just couldn't let go of. Something in Jesus he could not turn his back on, not without losing everything. And so all he can say to Jesus, almost helplessly, is: 'Lord, to whom else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

Eternal life. Those words again, like last week. Eternal life: the end of all our hungers, the time when love and beauty and goodness stop being things we glimpse and turn into things we *are*. The time when we realise that this world, even at its most glorious and wonderful, is but a faint whisper of our destiny. In Jesus we are headed for something incomparably, inconceivably greater than the world. And maybe that gives us the clue as to why there will always be a tension between being God's people and people of the world. Because people who are headed for eternal life know that the things the world thinks most valuable and most important are just *not*. They can even get in the way of what is. So sometimes, we'll need to reject what the world thinks good and sensible and obvious, for the sake of the promise into which we are headed. We don't even know what it is yet, but it is worth everything. And for it, we will do things which the world thinks folly. We will do things about money, about sex, and about power that make no sense, which are deeply unfashionable and unpopular. We will do all manner of madness, because we answer to a bigger wisdom. We might stay part of the church. And before you say '*that* doesn't sound very dramatic' – pause. Because this is one of the sharpest points of struggle today, where the pressure on us to settle down and blend in is, now, most intense. It's coming from several directions:

- First, there is the sheer awfulness of the church. We read this week yet another report into the Church abusing children, of how priests would hang crucifixes round the necks of children to mark them out as groomed and ready. You must have asked yourself: why be part of this? And don't kid yourself that that is the Catholics, and we're very different. We are one Christian Church. And at any rate Anglicanism has its own monsters. The Church, in its entirety, has been awful. Wouldn't you rather go away?
- Secondly, there's our own conformism. Being a Christian is hard. It means you have to stand out. It means you're at least meant to believe all sorts of deeply unfashionable things – say about marriage, or money, or about Jesus being not just another great teacher but God incarnate. People will be condescending, they'll think your faith means you're a bit dim or weak. And some will be very hostile: they'll think your religion is actually a wicked thing. None of us likes being unpopular. Wouldn't it be easier *not* to be a Christian, wouldn't it be easier just to go away?

- Lastly, our own consumerism. Why come to a church where I don't really like the music, or the service time isn't quite right, or the vicar goes on a bit, or the other people aren't very like me? They're a bit cliquy too, and I'm not really comfortable with their views on all sorts of things. I don't need people telling me what I can and can't do, and especially not people like *them*. I don't need church to be spiritual, or even be Christian. Wouldn't you rather go away?

Awfulness, conformism, and consumerism. They have driven people away. They are why when the Pope visited Ireland forty years ago, 450,000 people turned out for his Mass at the shrine in Knock – and when he does the same thing today, they hope for 45,000. Leaving the Church, blending back into the world, is obvious and easy.

But it is a mistake. It's a mistake above all because for all that is wrong about the church – and there is *much* wrong – this is where Jesus Christ promised to be. This is where he promised to feed you with his body and blood; this is where he promised to give you Himself, the one food you need, the one food that can feed you deeply enough, well enough, eternally enough, to fit you for glory. Turn your back on this, and you turn your back on the promise. Yes, you'll be a good person. You'll maybe even be a better person than some of us still here. You'll be wise and good and sophisticated and at home in the world – and that will be your tragedy, for you were made for more than that. You were made for eternal life. You were made for glory, and – amidst all the rubbish - it is offered you *here*. Don't give up on it. Don't settle down and blend in. Stand firm, with eyes on the prize – and God will give you more than the world can begin to imagine.

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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