

**High St Uniting Church Frankston
John 6:56 – 69**

Words of life



It's not overt, but there is a subtle story going on in John's Gospel that seems familiar to us. Where the other Gospels have call stories of Jesus collecting the 12 disciples and then more gather around Jesus as he teaches and heals, John gives us a picture that looks more like the 12 being those left after the crowd of

followers have turned away when the teaching got too hard to accept. Does that feel familiar? Our generation has seen a dramatic reduction in church membership. In the church I grew up in I was one of 20 in the primary class in Sunday School, 20 years later, I was the only one of that group still a member of that church. Now, a good percentage of those had moved to other suburbs for employment or housing, and were members of other churches, but many had just left. Is it similar to the story in John's Gospel, had they left because the teaching was too hard to accept? Many in the Progressive Theology movement would say 'Yes, we've got to stop talking about miracles and outdated dogmas.' But a closer reading of John's story leads us to see another reason. When Jesus asks the 12 if they are going to leave as well, Peter's answer says that it's not that our message is too hard to accept, or too offensive to modern reason, it's that we are not following Jesus' example of offering words of life. We offer words of judgement, words of morality, words of religious philosophy, even words of personal improvement, but we have failed to speak into people's lives with words that bring hope, that answer questions, that actually bring the life that Jesus was talking about. Life at home with God.

The whole of chapter 6 – the feeding of the thousands, the walking on water and then the discussion about bread from heaven – is John's exploration of the theme that Jesus is the true Bread of Life. With all the talk about eating the flesh and drinking the blood, this is John's theological discussion of the Eucharist – the Communion – but there is a deeper message here as well. I suspect that John has this discussion in his Gospel at this point, and not a description of the sharing at the last meal, for the same reason that there is the talk about manna. John is so intent on getting across the important teaching about Jesus as the true Bread, the spiritual bread bringing connection with God, that he doesn't want the message to be lost in ideas of some new ritual or earthly feeding. Like the discussion with Nicodemus, in chapter 3, there is the confusion about things of this world and things of the Spirit. When Jesus talks of bread come down from heaven, all the people can think of is the manna in the wilderness supplied by God through Moses, they cannot grasp the spiritual story. And the idea that Jesus is greater than Moses, that he is the One come down from heaven is the offensive part. Jesus talks of coming down from heaven, which is the Incarnation and the focus of being the Bread of Heaven, but in the rhetorical question about ascending back to heaven, the resurrection, we see Jesus alluding to what is an even a greater offence to the Jewish audience. This is more than a philosophical contest of flesh versus spirit but an inability to make the connection that true life is more than being fed bread for the stomach, there is a spiritual feeding that brings true life, life with God. The 12 are the ones who make that connection, the ones who hear Jesus speaking words of life.

John loves this word 'abide'. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." A theme he comes back to with the image of the vine and the branches later. Abide, live, be at home. Not just follow, not just swear allegiance to, not just look to in times of trouble, not just learn from as some sort of mentor, not even just worship, but live in and through and with Jesus as the Holy One of God. Is that the Jesus we talk about? Is that the life that we offer as a positive, affirming alternative to the worldly life of emptiness, questions, stresses and worries? Is that the life we talk about and offer as a gracious alternative to rituals and religion? Are we speaking words of life? Can we agree with Peter and boldly claim that only Jesus speaks the words of life?

One of the criticisms, even from within our faith, is that we don't talk enough about people's lives, particularly working lives and employment. We seem to take the attitude that church is like a refuelling station, Sunday we fill people up on our Christian faith and then assume they go off and live out that faith wherever they happen to be. But what if we take the task of speaking life seriously and speak into working lives – bullying, work demands, drudgery, dubious practices – with more than platitudes about loving neighbours or suffering produces endurance. We have words of life, let's share them. The power of forgiveness, the place of righteous anger, the healing power of recognition and touch, the strength and comfort of prayer and reflection. All this comes from the example of Jesus, the One come down from heaven. Feeding on the Bread of Life means feeding on the whole story of Jesus; feeding on mercy, compassion, forgiveness, justice, and connection to God. Each day, every day, living the life of being at home with God. Yes, some of the images and symbols are hard to understand. Yes, some of the creeds and doctrines are hard to accept. But they are second level, the first level is the words of life, love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. The heart of our faith is not in ritual or theology, but in the grace of God shown in the One who came down from God to share in our life and show us life with God. Life with God that is every day and not just Sunday. Life with God that gives meaning and depth to living. Life with God that knows no end.