

***Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
and lighten us with celestial fire
For if you are with us, nothing else matters
and if you are not with us, nothing else matters.
Amen.***

Move 1 Introduction.

I appreciate that when today's Gospel passage was read, Jeremy didn't throw up his hands and ask, "What on earth was Jesus thinking?" He didn't even scratch his head... He read the text with the reverence it deserves, without getting squeamish about the imagery.

So thanks Jeremy, because I've got to confess, that when I saw the Gospel reading in the Lection was the famous "eat my flesh and drink my blood" passage, I said to myself "Oh no, this preacher's in trouble."

I mean, the reading starts out quoting the words of Jesus, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood..." What's a preacher to do with that? What on earth was Jesus thinking?

Well, a bit of background. Jesus' ministry's at an all-time high. He's been drawing large crowds, doing mighty miracles... and then he goes and drops this clanger. At the start of the chapter we are told that a great crowd were following him. Admirers, followers, disciples - hanging on his every word. He'd just fed 5,000 people...and they're excited. They're ready to sign on the dotted line to become disciples. So *carpe diem* Jesus, sieze the day! Time to grab names, phone numbers, and emails.

But then he goes and spoils it all by saying something stupid like – "Eat my flesh." Jesus could have doubled his following right then and there, but he said: "Drink my blood." And that is, (to borrow a phrase from my students,) "just creepy". And when the crowds hear these disturbing words they respond in unison, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" And one after another they begin to drop away... and the trickle becomes a flood... the crowds leave in droves, voting with their feet. At the beginning of chapter 6 Jesus has 5,000 admirers... and a mere 69 verses later, he's down to 12.

Move 2

Now I don't know about you, but I reckon that if I'd been in Jesus' shoes and had made a blooper like that, at least I'd have been on the phone to one of those mega-church outfits down the road and asking for a few tips... I'd have been making a bee-line to church stores to spend what's left in my annual book allowance on titles such as *Understanding Church Growth*, *Grow your Church*, and *Come Back Churches*... - incidently, all of which are currently available on line. I know this much – I'd have tried to stem the flow!

But not Jesus! He lets them go. He doesn't backtrack, explain, placate, pacify or apologize... In fact, he appears to double-down. "Does this offend you?" he asks... and then he's off again, talking stuff that's hard to understand... including stuff about him ascending into heaven. What's going on here Mr. Jesus?

Move 3

Well, I think Jesus gives us a clue in verse 63, listen: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing." In other words, the underlying message to be taken from this passage is that **the key to our lives is not in us, but in Jesus**. We are to imbibe, to assimilate him. We cannot learn our true purpose and meaning by focusing on ourselves, but only by focusing on Jesus. But here's the thing about Jesus... he's always going about things in ways that don't make sense to us... I call it his up-side-down, back-to-front, inside-out way of operating

Take this freefall in attendance numbers... a loss of 4,988 in one day... Now, by any measure that's a failure. And if there's one thing above all others that feels like hell on earth for people like us, it's the experience of failure!

- Failure in exams
- Failure in business
- Failure in marriage

We live in a culture of success, and we measure our success in the same way we measure failure – by the numbers.

- The number attached to our house valuation
- The number at the bottom of our bank account
- The number of new customers we've gained
- The number of clicks on our website
- The number of likes on facebook

and also... also...

- The number of people in the pews

Move 4

Yet Jesus doesn't seem to give a toss about success or failure. He doesn't seem to think such categories.

- When offered the kingdoms of this world, he refuses the deal...
- When the people try to make him King, he hides...
- When he heals the leper, he asks for anonymity..

Jesus' whole agenda was counter to the culture... He was always going against the tide. And for us, his followers, that's our cue.

We are not called to tell people how to straighten up and fly right. Much less to promise them a life of personal comfort and affluence.

I was talking to a young man the other day and he told me that if he prays enough, and obeys enough – then God will grant him a Lambo... Now I admit that I had to ask what a Lambo is, and with a big smile he told me it's a Lamborghini... Well, the kid can be forgiven – he's only 11 years – but I couldn't resist mentioning that this bloke Jesus whom he's wanting to follow did a fair bit of praying and obeying, and ended up on a cross for his efforts. I also ask myself the question: What kind of Christianity puts ideas like that into 11 year old heads?

What if, rather than telling people that Christianity offers health, wealth and dreams come true – we spoke (in word and deed) about Jesus' claim on us to give up all things? What if we were a little more open about Jesus' criteria for his followers, self-denial and cross-bearing? About climbing down, rather than ascending the ladder. And yes, it may sound crazy to them, so crazy that some might just be intrigued by such an up-side-down, inside-out, and back-to-front bunch. Because, truth be told, most have tried this culture's agenda... many have been following it all their lives, and they know what little success they've really had.

And what if this Jesus we proclaim is right? What if he's in touch with a kind of success that the surrounding culture doesn't know anything about? Think about it: We talk of the bread that's made with flour – and he talks about the bread which is his flesh. We talk about the heart as a biological pump – pushing 5 litres of blood through the body every minute – and he talks about it as the thing that holds our deepest affections, what we treasure most. We talk about success as having more money and gaining more things – and he talks about it as relinquishment... not holding on tighter and tighter to things, but letting go, giving things away.

And what if he's right? Wouldn't our existence begin to feel more like real living, and less like some grim struggle in order to stay on the treadmill of success? More like living, and less like staving off failure?

And when all is said and done, maybe that's why we keep coming back to church week after week... Maybe we know, as Peter did, that Jesus has the words of eternal life. And deep down, we are hungry for those words... we're like, as they say, one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. And if we're ever asked what we're doing here, then like Peter we shrug our shoulders and say, "Really... where else would we go."

Amen.