

Where else can we go?

1 Kings 8; John 6:56–69

You'll recognise part of that gospel reading—it went back over some of what we heard last week about Jesus being our food and drink that keeps us going, in this life, and beyond—and it tells us what happened after Jesus said this. We'll come back to that.

But first I want to say a bit about the Old Testament reading from the first book of Kings chapter 8. Solomon and the dedication of the temple. Don't you love it? Solomon has built this beautiful temple in Jerusalem according to the Lord's instructions, and the priests move the sacred ark of the covenant into the inner sanctuary, the most holy place, and they come out ready to do their priestly things, but before they can do anything, 'a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD' (1 Kings 8:10–11). Isn't that beautiful? The service couldn't go on, because God interrupted the service! The cheek of Him—how dare he interrupt our service! How would it be if that happened now, to our service right here? But wouldn't you like that to happen? I think that would be every good priest's dream—to have God interrupt the service like that—for the glory of God to come down like a cloud and fill the house of the Lord. So that we couldn't even stand up. I suppose there may have been some priests who might not have liked it and would have preferred to be able to get on with their priestly business: 'I've prepared my sermon, we've printed the pewsheet, we've chosen the hymns, we've got our rosters—what's all this that's happening, getting in the way—we just want to get on with what we've planned!'

Some of them may even have tried to shut the door to keep God out. I don't like their chances. Because the Bible tells us that God has always wanted to be with His people, and to make His people fit to be with

(see Exodus 29:42–46). That’s why Jesus took flesh as one of us, so he could dwell amongst us, with all of God’s glory and love shining out of him (see John 1:14). And Jesus said, when he had finished his work, God the Father and the Holy Spirit were moving in and taking up residence in us with him (see John 14:15–23). So try and stop God from coming in and taking over! No chance. God has done that already. He’s here now.

We’ve been without dear Peter Linn here now for a few weeks, and some of us may be thinking, ‘Well, at least now we’ve got Martin. And there’s always Brian, and Ruth, and Sonja—we’ve got our priests—we’re right. Wrong! We’ve got God. *God is here!* Brian and I are going to leave you this week and go to Melrose on retreat, and Sonja’s off on camp with the young people—where will you be then, without us? God is here—you’ve got God. It’s our job just to keep telling you that, so that you don’t miss out. And we’ll keep telling you that again when we get back. Because God is with us too.

OK—back to feeding on Jesus in John chapter six. Having Jesus as our food and drink, the one who keeps us going. Here and now, and on for ever. ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them . . . whoever eats me will live because of me . . . the one who eats this bread will live forever’ (John 6:56, 57, 58). An interesting thing happened after Jesus said that. Many of his disciples said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ (John 6:60). I don’t know how you went with my sermon last week, when I said it’s not all about church; it’s all about Jesus. It’s all about our faith-love relationship with Jesus—absolutely central to our life—as that which keeps us going. While we may have been prepared to go along with that because that’s what Martin said, we also may have had some difficulty with that. We may be more comfortable talking about church—when we ever do—rather than about Jesus personally. So while you may have enjoyed my presentation last week, we still may have some reservations or wonderings about the message.

Once again, Jesus doesn't make it any easier for us. Rather than toning down the message to try to make it more acceptable, Jesus upped the anti. He made it harder. If you are offended by that, he said, try this on for size: 'what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?' (John 6: 62). It was a clear way of saying: I have come from heaven, from God, as part of God, and I'm going back there, and you'll see it. Believe that! That's a big ask: to believe that this man, this human being, a Jew who lived in Israel, all that time ago, is from God, as part of God. As we say in the creed: 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God . . . of one being with the Father'. As we said last week, what did Thomas say to Jesus? 'My Lord and my God'! One of the most profound expressions of faith in the whole of the New Testament.

And if that's true, then everything that Jesus did, and everything that Jesus said, is of profound significance for us. We are receiving a communication here directly from God, the source of everything, the creator of the universe. Here, in little old St Thomas's Church, Port Lincoln! Jesus went on to say: 'It is the spirit that gives life'—that is, the spirit that is from above, from God, from heaven. And he said, 'the flesh is useless'. Discount God, and discount Jesus as the gift of God, and think that we are it, and it all comes from us, and it's all up to us, and we're left with a meaningless and purposeless lump of cells and molecules. The flesh, on its own, is useless. On the other hand, Jesus says to us, 'The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life'—life-giving communication direct from God. Here in this church, now.

Do we accept that, or do we keep on trying to make it on our own? Jesus really lays it on the line for us, doesn't he? He knows it takes a leap of faith. And he knew there were a few listening to him who still needed to take that leap of faith. He said, 'among you there are some who do not believe'. Jesus had an uncanny ability to be able to suss that out: 'For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and'—even—'who was the one that would betray him' (John 6:64)—who would hand him over to death at the hands of his enemies. But he was prepared to leave all of that to the Father: he went on, 'For

this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father' (John 6:65). All in God's good hands.

But for a number of people there at the time, it was a leap too far. And they left. 'Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him' (John 6:66). That happens, doesn't it? Sometimes people leave the church. When I arrived here I was handed a print-off of the parish roll, with everyone's names and contact details on it, so I could get in touch and get to know you and pray for you, and I was going through it with someone who knows most of the people, and we found that, apart from the ones who had died, there were a few who are still in the town but who don't come to church any more.

Now if you are going to leave the church, it's best to be clear about why you are doing that. Some people do it because they don't get along with someone else here, and have taken offence, and leave and don't come back. I'm not sure that's a good enough reason. We're all a mob of sinners here—we start off every service saying that: we have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. And we're all a mob of forgiven sinners here—we start off every service saying that too: 'pardon you and set you free from all your sins'—because Jesus dealt with them and finished them once for all on the cross—we are cleansed and freed and healed by God. According to God in His grace in Christ, whatever we may have done or may not have done, right or wrong, we are now living in a guilt-free zone. The priest declares this at the beginning of each service. So other people's sins, or our own sins, are never a good enough reason for leaving the church or staying away. We might as well just come straight out with it and say we don't believe. If that's the case. Because if we do still believe—in a God who does that: total forgiveness and intimate closeness with God as our heavenly Father—then we're going to want to hang around to see what's going to happen next!

And Jesus turned to those who were left, particularly his twelve closest disciples, and he said, 'Do you also wish to go away?' (John 6:67)—he gave them that option. But if we're coming to know a God like that,

where else would we want to go? Where else could you find something as good as that? So Peter spoke for all of us who still find ourselves hanging in there: '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' (John 6:68–69).

So what of those of us who are still here with Christ? We'll go back to the Old Testament reading—Solomon and the temple—to pick up on a couple of things. First, Solomon prayed for the people of God: 'Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place' (1 Kings 8:28–29).

So the first thing we can do is pray. The temple was the house of prayer. The temple's not there any more. But Jesus said he is the temple (see John 2:19–21). Jesus is the place of prayer. And he is with us here. His prayers are always heard and answered. So we pray 'in Jesus name', 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. And the New Testament says that we are now the temple (see 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5), we are the place where God has taken up residence (see John 14:15–23), so when we come together—in this building or out of it—we are the house of prayer, with Jesus we are the place where God hears and answers our prayers. I like what Brian said at the Memorial Service here on Friday, when he was telling people to turn off their mobile phones: 'This is God's house, and God will talk with you if he wants to, but he won't need your phone to do it! We have a direct line in prayer.

So Solomon prayed for God's people Israel, that their prayers would be heard: 'Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive' (1 Kings 8:30).

Which is what God does.

But then Solomon prays also for someone else: ‘Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel . . . comes and prays toward this house . . .’ (1 Kings 8:41, 42). Someone who is not one of us, who not like us, who is different from us—they’re going to hear about what God is doing and are going to want to join in. What do we do about them?

How do we get on with people who are different from us? Who are not from here, or who haven’t been part of the church? How do we treat people whom we haven’t seen here before? Do we look them up and down and think, ‘We haven’t seen you here before, you’re not one of us, you’re different from us, you don’t really belong here’. Or do we think, ‘Here’s someone interesting that I could get to know—I wonder what I can do to make them feel welcome?’

I recently came to realise—I don’t know why it took me so long— that if we regard ourselves as normal, then everyone else will appear a bit strange. Because we are all different. Whereas if we all see ourselves as somewhere along the strangeness spectrum, and accept that, then we might all shuffle along with each other a little bit better. Once when I was in a ministry team, one morning our leader said, ‘You’ve all got foibles—you’ve all got your own idiosyncrasies’, and I thought, ‘Speak for yourself; I’m normal!’—because he was a bit strange. But I’ve since seen the wisdom of that, so I pass that on to you: we are all different from each other, if we regard ourselves as normal, then everyone else will appear a bit strange. But if we all see ourselves as somewhere along the strangeness spectrum, and accept that, then we might all shuffle along with each other a bit better. That’s my little bit of wisdom for this morning.

And Solomon prayed: ‘when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel’—that they might have their prayers answered in this gathering of people in Christ that is God’s great house of prayer, along with us.