

A Sermon Preached by
The Rev. Canon William Johnston for Proper 16, The Season After Pentecost, Year B
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In most places in the Bible the terms “believer” and “follower” are all but synonymous. One could replace one word for the other and few would argue the point. But in the section from St. John’s Gospel from which our recent Gospel readings have come, and certainly in our passage for today, a very clear distinction is made between the two.

The teachings about Jesus as the Bread of Life and the sacramental teachings about the saving power of the Body and Blood of Jesus follow on the account of Jesus feeding the multitude in the wilderness. Here we find a huge crowd of people who followed Jesus back to the other side of the lake called the Sea of Galilee. After having been miraculously fed with five barley loaves and two fish, they follow Him back to where they began.

One would certainly think that such determination must be inspired by belief. But Jesus, when He sees them, indicates that they were not believers but people who were following Him for the wrong reason. “You are not looking for me because you have seen the signs,” Jesus said, “but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat.” (Jn 6:26)

In other words, “You do not follow me as the Lord of life who can meet your ultimate spiritual needs, and whose very being demands your obedience and allegiance. You are following me for the comfort you have gained from me. You’re looking for another free lunch.”

How many followers of Jesus today are following for the same kind of reasons? How many of us come to church only for the comfort it gives, but do not go forth from here with a sense of the Lordship of Christ and a determination to live in obedience to His will?

Are we believers?. .. or only followers? Jesus wants us to know that there is a difference and to examine our lives accordingly.

Not only is there a difference between believers and followers in terms of their reasons for following, but Jesus also wants us to know that believers can’t pick and choose which of His teachings they will accept. If we believe that Jesus is Lord, if we believe that He is God incarnate, then His word is God’s word and carries with it the full weight of God’s authority. If we believe anything less of Jesus, then we are not “believers” but only “followers.”

This is the point of our Gospel reading for today where we find many people who had been following Jesus reacting negatively to one of His teachings. Up until this point they must have been satisfied with all they had seen or heard of Him.

John the Baptist’s reference to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” did not sound too threatening; His turning water into wine and feeding many with very little was certainly an attractive talent. His teachings on being born of water and the Spirit and of Himself as giving living water were gentle enough. His healing miracles were exciting and His tangling with the religious authorities was probably invigorating. But His sacramental teaching about Himself as the Bread of Life (JN 6:35), His putting Himself on a par with God by insisting that just as He drew life from the Father, so could humankind draw life

from Him (JN 6:57) and that those who do not eat His flesh and drink His blood will not have life in them (vs 53), these teachings they found intolerable.

Now, it is understandable how people who had not experienced Jesus' institution of the Holy Eucharist and His use of bread and wine as the outward signs would have been confused and even upset by the teaching that somehow their very lives were dependent on their eating Jesus' Flesh and drinking His Blood. But, if one truly believes in Him as the Lord and accepts His Word as divine, then nothing He said can be rejected. It will be accepted as truth, knowing that it comes from God's goodness and love, and trusting in the Spirit to bring future understanding.

But, some of His followers could not do this and they "stopped going with Him" (vs 64) and, as Jesus affirms, the reason was that they did not believe; and the problem was not simply that they did not believe what He said; they did not truly believe in Him.

At least they were honest. They were not guilty, as some are, of the hypocrisy of appearing to be believers when, in fact, they are not.

Sometimes, I think, most of us are not quite so honest. Rather than openly rejecting some of Jesus' teachings that we find upsetting, we are more prone to simply ignore them – to go on as if they didn't exist. How often do we find ourselves professing Jesus as the Lord of our lives with our lips when we are in fact living by the corrupt and often immoral standards of the world.

Are we "believers" ? – or only "followers"? and dishonest ones at that.

Jesus asks us, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and not do what I say?" (LK 6:46) That's a call to repentance and amendment of life. That's a call to be believers and "doers of the word." (JAS 1:22)

Why do we gather, as we do, for the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ? Because our reason tells us that this is the way to worship God? I think not. Our reason would never come up with such a strange way of worshipping. Prayers, teaching, and hymns would seem quite adequate. But we do it because this is what Jesus taught and commanded us. "Do this, " He said, " in remembrance of me."

Does it seem reasonable that our worship should involve eating bread and drinking wine? To the rational mind that seems almost silly. We do it because Jesus said, "This is my Body; this is my Blood" and because He said, "Anyone who eats my Body and drinks my Blood has eternal life." (JN 6:54)

Our reason does not tell us that there is anything of vital importance in worshipping as we do. Our experience, however, born from obedience, tells us that what we do here is essential to our very being. We know that Jesus is present in many ways and forms. But we have come to know that He is present in this sacrament in a way that He is present nowhere else. We know this because He said it was so and we believe.

And yet, there were those who found His words on this subject intolerable; just as for many of us there are aspects of His teaching we may find difficult to understand and accept.

But let us follow the example of His original disciples who accepted all, not because they understood but because they believed in Jesus as the "Holy one of God," the one who had the message of eternal life, and because they knew there was no one else to whom they could go.