



# COME & SEE

## CLARITY AT THE CROSSROADS

**Sunday 5 March 2023**

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Unlike the first five chapters of the book of John, today in chapter 6, it's not an individual but a great crowd who comes to see Jesus. And, as we will see in this longest chapter of John, many come to a crossroads and from this point, no longer follow. For simplicity, I'll break it down into three main thoughts.

*"Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick." (John 6:1-2)*

### **THE CROWD**

Jesus' ministry enters a new phase. Instead of going to specific people and groups, people are now following Him around, curious to come and see what all the commotion is about. Matthew chapter 14 tells us that this crowd was in the order of 5,000 men plus women and children. That's a huge crowd of people! And we read in verse 5, when Jesus saw a great crowd coming toward Him, He said to Philip, *"Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"* This was a brilliant educational opportunity for His disciples and an unforgettable sermon illustration - which we will come to shortly. But first, let's think more about the crowd

*"After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself... Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus." (John 6:14-15, 24)*

When Sophie was about 3 years old, I took her to a Wiggles concert at Revesby RSL. My little girl knew every word and every action of every song. I thought she was going to explode with excitement, along with all the other exploding little girls there. And most of the dads were having fun watching their kids, happy to be in the crowd - but there was a crowd inside that crowd who were especially invested into the world of Wiggles.

I had a parallel experience just a few months ago when Sophie and I went to the 5 Seconds Of Summer (5SOS) concert. This was the Wiggles all over - those little exploding girls are just a whole lot taller now, and the people on the stage a whole lot younger and less daggy. All the adults are up the back on the Opera House stairs, but somehow I'm with my little exploding girl right down the front in the mosh pit with 10,000 exploding teenager girls. And again, I don't mind the music; I even remember a line from a few songs... I'm there spectating, but surrounded by real followers. A crowd in a crowd. People at all stages of commitment and engagement and enthusiasm.

We know that Jesus had a core group consisting of Peter, James and John; and then the twelve disciples, along with some key women; as well as a larger community of 70 disciples, and it is possible that this was a subset of an even larger group of more loosely defined curious followers who were, in turn, a subset of massive crowds like this one! This subset are the ones that aren't privy to Jesus' movements and go to the effort of getting into boats to go looking for Him, and eventually to catch up to Jesus in Capernaum. *"Rabbi, when did you get here?"* (John 6:25) We've been searching for you, and you didn't tell us the tour was moving on...Jesus, instead of telling them **when He came**, Jesus told them **why they came**.

*"Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you..."* (John 6:26-27)

The Message Version says, *"Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides."* (John 6:27)

There is a long conversation at the Synagogue that goes for 30 verses about the miracle of manna in the desert and who the manna was really pointing to. And, by all accounts, it is a confronting and tense conversation. Jesus says bluntly, "You are chasing the signs, not the Giver of the signs. Just like the Israelites celebrated the manna in the desert and not the One who gave it." This group chasing Jesus tasted the bread and wanted miracle food to fill their stomachs and a miracle King to kick out the Romans. Jesus knew that they wanted a certain kind of Messiah - which is why He left in the first place. And Jesus says, "You are looking for what I can offer you, but what you need is Me." And now the conversation starts to get really tense...

"At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" (John 6:41-42)

Recently the Red Hot Chilli Peppers came back to Australia. Fans (usually gen-Xers like me), had been waiting years for the Chilli Peppers to return - me included! But concert tickets were so expensive and sold out really fast when they went on sale. But I was a little relieved that I'd not gone because after the concert the reviews were terrible...

- "Wish I could take back my decision to go. Absolutely gutted by that performance."
- "Well, that was disappointing, definitely won't be seeing them again!!!"
- "Good experience (but) won't see em again."
- "Been their biggest fan all my life and after that concert would never go again. Played a few old songs but mostly new rubbish that no one knows,"

Have you ever been to a concert or sporting fixture and left disappointed or underwhelmed? All the NRL St George supporters know what I'm talking about... The big issue with the Red Hot Chilli Peppers was the set list - fans were going to a concert with expectations that they will play all their hits... Because those are the songs that you have a deep connection to. Even die-hard fans walk away sometimes when you don't give them what they want.

Jesus was not playing the set list that crowds came to hear; even His closest fans.

- For some, it was the stage show they wanted - miracles and healings.
- For some, it was the free giveaways they'd heard about - maybe a free lunch.
- For some, it was revolutionary songs about taking back the country from the oppressors.
- For some, it was the comfort and nostalgia of familiar tunes that made them feel good...

And Jesus had none of those songs on His setlist! His lyrics, we read are hard and offensive - they were then, and they still are now. Crowds can be fickle. We think crowd 'equals' success; but for Jesus, it appears that metric is inconsequential. So what was Jesus claiming that was so hard and offensive?

## **THE CLAIM**

John is full of claims of who Jesus is. in chapter 6, we see the first of seven "I Am" statements - the light, the door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way truth and life and here the first: "*I am the bread of life.*" (John 6:35) It helps to understand the significance of this claim by understanding bread in Israel. In Exodus 12, do you remember how God asked the Israelites to remember their salvation from slavery in Egypt?

A passover meal and a week-long festival of bread! Bread was going to be a sign of God's great story of salvation.

Two months out of Egypt, in Exodus chapter 16 when this great crowd of Israel were hungry in the desert and grumbling against Moses, God revealed Himself to the great crowd of Israelites. And for their deep need, what did He use? Bread from heaven: manna. Daily bread. Just enough for the day. Enough to remind you that God will provide for my needs today, and I have to trust for tomorrow. This was so significant that the Ark of the Covenant contained a jar of bread.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness to turn stones into bread. And when Jesus wanted the disciples to understand and remember the crucifixion, He used bread to be the icon of His sacrifice, broken for the sins of the world.

So, bread was central to their national identity, the story of salvation, and Jesus makes all those connections in this most public sign. Multiplying five loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds an impossibly large crowd. But then Jesus explains this miracle to those who have pursued Him in their boats.

*"I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die."* (John 6:28-50)

What is Jesus claiming? "I sustain, and I nourish you as only God can. Our ancestors ate manna in the desert. They got hungry over and over and eventually died, but eat this bread, and you're going to live forever. If you come to Me, your real hunger will be satisfied forever. Everything else will leave you hungry and unsatisfied, but I won't." Jesus then shifts from talking about what bread can do to what only He can personally do as the true bread of life.

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* (John 6:51-52)

And just to drive it home, He says, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." (John 6:53-54)

Would you have said it this way? Seriously Jesus, couldn't You have chosen other words? Did you have to be so controversial? You know that blood is a big deal in the Jewish culture. You know that this sounds like cannibalism. So narrow, so exclusive, are You really

saying You are the embodiment of the whole national story and the Giver of eternal life?

And this claim is too much for people to hear... This guy is crazy! This was so offensive! People get enraged, saying, "This is a hard teaching, and we are done."

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." (John 6:66)

I love that the Gospel writers include this detail. Clearly, John thought we need it. Today there feels, more than ever, like a lot of pressure to pitch the message of Jesus as popular, attractive, progressive and inoffensive as possible in order to convince people to sign up. And, in the case of those who go to church, to keep 'em coming.

"Come to Jesus. He is really kind. He loves everybody just as they are. He doesn't mind what you do so long as you say you believe in Him. You don't need to make Jesus the moral authority of your life. It's all about grace. You keep whatever lifestyle you feel is right for you, mix a little Jesus with your essential oils and yoga, and your life project will be even better."

Recent McCrindle research found a very high proportion of people who would not call themselves followers, actually like Jesus. I figure they have just met the tame inoffensive version. How did CS Lewis put it? "He is not a tame lion. He is not safe. But He is good."

Is Jesus compassionate on the crowd? Yes, He fed them, and He would die for them. But does Jesus ever fail at anything? No. Does He ever not do or say what His Father asks Him to do or say? No. So was His choice of words intentional? Yes. So, was the disciples' rejection of His words a success or a failure? It must be a success. This is reinforced by the way in which Jesus doesn't backtrack, soften the message, or make it more PC ('politically correct') to sooth their reaction. He even asks His inner circle, who were probably feeling just as disoriented and offended, "*You do not want to leave too, do you?*" (John 6:67)

This is not the only instance of Jesus erring on the side of offence. In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus says, "*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.*" (Matthew 10:37-38) If you've read the Bible and not been offended, have another read. "This is a hard teaching" feels like my regular response.

So why does Jesus speak in such a provocative way?

Provocation is to bring people to a crossroads of clarity.

## THE CLARITY

Who needs the clarity? Firstly, it's not Jesus. Jesus already knows who will genuinely come to Him. He is completely confident that true disciples will be drawn and enabled by the Father through the Holy Spirit: *"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you - they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe."* For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, *"This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."* (John 6:63-65)

Jesus knows their hearts, and so the clarity is not for Him but for them. Do they know their heart as they stand at the crossroads of discipleship? We read many in the crowd turned back and no longer followed. And you know, Jesus let them leave because He knew their hearts. He knew they were following the signs and the benefits, not the Giver. Jesus knows hearts much better than I do, so I find this part of the passage comforting and disturbing. Disturbing because, unlike Jesus, I don't know when to let someone walk away and when to run after them. I've had to get used to seeing people walk away from Jesus and the church...

And Jesus lets them go. But He also tells parables of lost sheep and coins and sons being found, so you get stuck between, "Do we let them go because they were following the benefits but not the Giver? Or maybe if we package the Gospel better, or maybe if people hear it just one more way, or one more time, and church is more attractive, and we meet more of their needs, then they will fully commit to following Jesus...?"

But what is comforting is that Jesus performed miracles and preached a message which He says is full of life and the Spirit and these people still walked away! If Jesus can't convince everyone, why do I think I can? It's a relief to know that I have a lot less to do with someone's acceptance of Jesus than I think; that the Spirit alone does the convicting and drawing. The Spirit gives life. He draws us, but He doesn't drag us to Him. So the disciples on the curious fringes are at the crossroads - and they reject Jesus and His teaching and they walk away.

The second response is that of Peter: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."* (John 6:68-69)

They know Jesus in such a way that they believe His identity and trust His character, even if they can't understand His words. Peter puts his foot in it on many occasions, but he nails it here: "You alone are the bread that gives life."

So it feels like this crossroad is clarity between two basic decisions: accept and follow Jesus as the Holy One of God, or reject Him and walk away. And I do think Jesus is pressing

His audience to clarify the nature of their discipleship: Are you in or are you out?

It seems black and white; and, at a basic level, it is in the end... But is life ever really that simple? To me, the crossroads looks and feels a lot more like this:



Does your life feel like this? Does your relationship with Jesus feel like this? Peter loves Jesus but is still going to deny Jesus several times. He is going to walk away and go back to fishing. He is going to face disorienting doubts, temptations, failures and martyrdom - but keep the faith! Jesus celebrates Peter's response with a terrifying statement about one of them: *"Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!"* (John 6:71) Here He's talking about Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray Him. Nice ending, Jesus! That's gotta make everyone feel great... Judas was also one of the twelve and was going to face disorienting doubts, temptations and failures - and shipwreck his life!

Jesus brings us all to intersection points in life. They often don't feel as simple as, "turn left or right..." They can be hard to navigate, and sometimes you have to get lost to get on track. But here is the thing: just like the inner and fringe disciples, Jesus knows your heart better than you do. He knows when you feel stuck, scared, disoriented, and desiring Him to be Lord... And He knows when you are disbelieving, idolatrous and want to be in charge.

And the good news is that you are way worse than you think you are... And He is way better than you think He is! It's not your goodness that makes you a follower; it's His goodness. The Gospel is that He did for you what you can't do for yourself. You may grow a little, become a bit more like Jesus, but it's still bad: apart from Him, you have a terminal problem. He is kind, generous, and merciful; and He wants you, He will draw you, and He knows who will be drawn.

Where are you today in your clarity about following Jesus wholeheartedly?

When Charlotte was about 8 years old, we went to a waterpark when on holiday in Bali. There was a big ride called the 'Boomerang'. She was terrified and didn't want to ride it, but I convinced her (ok, pressured her) to do it with me. We queued for about 20 minutes and finally got to the front of the line - and she got stuck. Too scared to ride the slide, too

far to turn back. I sufficiently bribed and manipulated her into taking the ride... And she still holds it against me to this day. But I think many people are stuck at the top of the waterslide of faith, between "I'm all in on this wild ride" (Peter), walking away from this offensive crazy man (the crowd), or like Judas they seem 'in' but secretly they're not really' maybe they're deconstructing or exploring life on their own terms or chasing other prizes. The tragedy of Judas comes at the end of his life, when he realises he traded Jesus for a bag of silver...

This thought has been circling my mind for a few months now and I think it lands right here. So many people in our cultural moment, especially Gen-Y / Millennials, have deconstructed their faith but can't work out what the alternative 'bread of life' is. And so, many people are stuck between wanting to follow Jesus and wanting to walk away. We are stuck because the implications of walking away still feel too great. But the implications of following are also too great. We are afraid of what it will mean if we follow Jesus, and we are afraid of what it will mean if we reject Jesus. So we just freeze at the intersection - not really following or leaving...

Are you stuck? Or is a family member or friend stuck? I think this is a precarious place to live, and the danger is, like Judas, you one day look back and realise you traded Jesus for a bag of silver or a career, house, family, life on your own terms... One day you will have to explain that to Him.

You can't be a disciple by association. Being in the crowd is not following Jesus. He calls you to come to Him today. I believe you are here, or you are watching, because the Father has already drawn you, enabling and convicting you. He knows your heart and wants you come follow Him past your offence or confusion; to trust His character and His purposes and will for you as you live for His glory and the advancement of His Kingdom here.