

It is a soap opera...

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is a soap opera, and at one level it is not much more...

John was brilliant in his own way, rugged and a loner, but he had drawn around himself a good group of mates and fans. He had a tough message for a generation that needed to hear something genuine, but then comes along his cousin Jay. They are mates and John initiates Jay into the club.

Jay was both softer and harder than John and in the end of Season 1 Jay manages to get some of John's mates and fans to go with him. Then John dies, killed even, decapitated.

Season 2 opened up with Jay. He is travelling around small towns with his mates. He's having some success and crowds are coming to see them. It's all going so well, the crowds have left satisfied filled with the good stuff that Jay and his mates have been giving them. How could it get any better?

Well you all know soap operas as well as I do and you know the answer to that question: good times cannot go on for ever, something has to happen. Jay starts saying things that sound egocentric. Has he forgotten John? Has he forgotten his own humble home-town beginnings? There are these great Me sayings. It's about Me; I am the bread of life, I am the resurrection, I am the gate. It is all so self centred. Then in the town of Capernaem it comes to something of a head. Jay has been talking again, this time telling the crowds that they have to eat him, eat his flesh, that nothing else will do. But rather than adoring him this time the crowds start to really question him and they want to know what it really means. Many who find what he says hard; not actually hard to understand but hard to accept. And they start to leave. Jay says to them "Do you take offence at what I am saying?" But it is too late. The crowds are slipping away. At the end of Season Two its another climax; this time it sees Jay talking with his closest mate and Jay says to him "Are you going to leave too?" His rather dismal reply is "Whom else could we go to?"

And that is the soap opera story arc. The Protagonist, the rise of the usurper, then the over reach of the new boy and the fall.

If this really was a soap opera and we wanted Season 3, I reckon John would have to come back from the dead again. By the way that's not such a crazy idea, Herod the Tetrarch wanted to know if John had come back from dead (Luke 9:7).

Today's Gospel reading is like a single episode from that soap opera narrative. Jesus has been moving around Capernaum and the crowds have been coming, really coming, in their thousands. But the teaching has been getting harder and when it comes to this issue of eating Jesus' flesh the crowds have started leaving. But the text is even tougher than that. In verse

66 we read, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

It is easy for us to think to think of Jesus drawing people to himself. It is easy to picture ourselves on the edge of that crowd. Seeing the young vivacious Galilean preaching, healing, gathering, befriending, he was simply captivating.

But there is another side to Jesus, a Jesus we see less often in our minds. And that is the Jesus who disappointed people, the Jesus who said such difficult things that even his followers simply walked away. Can you picture yourself on the edge of the crowd again and feel the distrust build, the sense of let down and disappointment? There are no miracles here today but just strange teaching. Picture then, picture people leaving, not just a few, but many, not just members of the crowd, but his own disciples.

Would you have stayed? What would you have made of that teaching? Is the Jesus we really want the nice one who causes no offence? Is the church we want to come to, the pleasant, friendly, crowded one?

If your answers to these questions is yes, then I suspect you will be disappointed, just like some of those disciples.

The Jesus we follow is one who can cause offence. His teaching was hard. Hard, not like, “Oh if you only really understood me then you would agree” but hard as in “Give me all your money” hard. By the way, Jesus wants more than your money.

And the church that tries to grow without causing offence is one that is not true to the teaching of the one we call Lord.

The offence, and here we are back to this bread stuff, is that we will find life in the eating of flesh, Jesus’ flesh. It is about Jesus and being in communion with him. I came across a quote the other day. Spirituality divorced from a relationship with God is simply idolatry¹. That is worth pondering. So too is this. Remember the soap opera story at the start of this sermon. Where did the disciples who left Jesus go, what well meaning, nice, non offensive clubs did they form?

Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

It is offensive, it is difficult. But if it is true then what we do here is life giving and of supreme importance.

Dean John
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¹ John Fenton