

# Biting off more than you can chew

*A sermon on John 6: 56-69 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 August 2021*

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## Message

Jesus offers life in all its fullness, but many would rather settle for the odd snack rather than the full banquet.

## Sermon

If I were to speak of the difference between “sticking your toe in” and “diving in at the deep end” most of you would know what I meant. These are metaphors for the different ways we approach things. Which one is good and which one is stupid depends on the context.

Just look at the current covid lockdown restrictions. Victoria, after the lessons of last year, now takes the deep dive straight into hard lockdown as soon as there are unexplained cases of community transmission. New South Wales took the tentative, stick-a-toe-in, lockdown lite approach, and is now dealing with cases numbers more than 20 times worse and a hard lockdown that has come too late.

In our personal lives too, the merits of the two approaches depend on the context. If you are betting on a horse race for the first time, the more cautious “sticking your toe in” is definitely preferable than “betting your house on it”. But if you have just arrived home with your newborn baby, there is no room for a cautious “testing of the waters”. You’re “in over your head” and you’d better start swimming!

Most Australians like being in and around water, so these swimming pool metaphors come easily to us – even if the pools are currently closed – but there are other sorts of metaphors used to make the same kind of point.

In the story we’ve been hearing from John’s gospel over the last few weeks, Jesus uses another such metaphor, and in tonight’s climax of the story, the image hits home hard. If it were our swimming pool metaphor, tonight we hear that some are ready to take the plunge, and others were unwilling to do more than splash a bit of water over themselves.

The metaphor that Jesus uses is not a swimming pool one, but a food one. We sometimes use such food and drink metaphors too. Do you “try a sip” or “gulp down the whole glass”? Do you take a cautious taste, or bite off more than you can chew? Do you sniff it first, or swallow it, hook, line and sinker?

When it comes to matters of religious faith, our culture usually values caution. We discourage diving in at the deep end or swallowing it, hook, line and sinker. Dip your toe in. Take a cautious taste. And this is all very well. In most situations, it is probably sound advice.

But perhaps we have become rather accustomed to dipping our toes in and we’ve forgotten that that is supposed to be an exploratory step that leads to a decision to take the plunge and actually go for a swim. Because the swim is the point.

Or to use the food metaphor, the test taste is a prelude to a full meal, and the full meal is the point. “Eat this bread, and you will live forever”, says Jesus. But just take an exploratory nibble, and you will miss the point.

For the last few weeks, we have heard Jesus working this image over and over. The images are very confronting. “You must eat my flesh and drink my blood”, he says, “or you will not have true life.” It sounds almost insane, cannibalistic, frightening. There is no meek and mild exploratory testing out of things here. It is all or nothing. But Jesus has earned the right to ask for such an all or nothing commitment from us, because he has made such an all or nothing commitment to us.

Seeing the world in desperate need, God did not carefully test the waters. God did not take a small taste to see what would happen, to see whether we were receptive to the message of salvation. God did not weigh up the options and make tentative steps to reach out to us while all the while keeping an escape path open. Not at all. God dived right in at the deep end.

God became human. Not a bit human. Not merely human in appearance. Not half human with some reserve powers to enable him to get out of trouble if the going got too hot. No. God became fully human in the person of Jesus, just as fragile and vulnerable and at risk as any of us. No safety harness. No opt-out clause. No cooling off period. No gradual approach.

In Jesus we have seen God’s total and unequivocal commitment to us. Yes it’s risky. Yes it’s reckless. But oh yes, it is love. Total no-holds-barred love, and when love is that fierce it does not hold back.

You know that. Desperate parents will rush through flames into a burning house to try to save their child. Or dive into surging flood waters. Or all sorts of crazy reckless things. Even animals will do it for the love of their own. I’ve seen small birds attack large dogs in an effort to drive them away from their nests.

When love is all-consuming, it does not dip its toes in; it does not stop to count the cost or calculate the odds. It just charges in recklessly, risking everything, in the desperate attempt to save the beloved one. And that is what God has done for you, because that is how fiercely and all-consumingly God loves you. God will stop at nothing, weigh up nothing, pause tentatively at nothing. God sees you – and sees the world – in mortal peril and just plunges right in.

But we are often rather reticent in responding to such love, aren’t we? We stand back, and play it cool. We want to take our time to see how it unfolds. And we do it even here, because although God can see how much danger we are in, we mostly don’t even realise it. We are like the proverbial frog in the pot as the temperature is slowly raised. We are dead before we even feel it. We tend to think we might be missing something, but God can see that we are on the verge of missing everything, and God feels desperate for us while we just feel oblivious.

Right through this story, Jesus has illustrated this from the old story of Israel’s escape from slavery into the wilderness. He reminds them of how the people ate the manna that God gave them in the desert, but still they grumbled and wished they could go back to the land of slavery. They had no perspective. Emergency rations are for an emergency situation, but no, they would rather go back and die in chains than risk it all on the break for freedom that God was making possible for them.

And Jesus is right; so often that is us. We are not sure we want real freedom. We are not sure we want life in all its fullness. We are not sure we want to eat the full banquet that God

spreads before us. Can't we just have a taste? Just dip our toes in? Can't we just have lighter chains, or shorter hours, or increased rations? Can't we hold onto the devil we know, and have occasional tastes of real life to make things more bearable?

And we can only think such things because we don't get how much danger we are in. We are deluded into thinking that things are merely uncomfortable, not life and even world threatening. We want to stand back and watch and wait and see if any better alternatives come up.

"Come on!" says Jesus, "I'm offering to vaccinate you against a living death."

"No, I'd just like to check it out from a distance for a while, see whether any of the conspiracy theories turn out to have some truth in them, and perhaps weigh up the likelihood of the next generation of shots being better. I don't want to make any hasty decisions." And next thing we know we can't breathe, but we don't even recognise this living death, because we are so used to it.

Our country has suffered more from catastrophic bushfires than most, and now we're seeing our experience spreading around the world, but our government may well still turn up to the Glasgow climate summit later this year without a net-zero target, because our gutless politicians are still holding back and holding back and hoping for a cheaper and more palatable option to show up.

We are so used to the pitiful half-life that passes for normal in our world that we barely notice what we are turning down. We barely notice that Jesus is offering us spirit and life; life in all its fullness, life beyond anything we had previously imagined. But afraid of biting off more than we can chew, we try to take just a taste, to just dip our toes in, and we miss the point.

And when Jesus shakes his head and urges us to take a big bite, to throw ourselves in headlong, we take offence. How dare he question the wisdom of our cultivated restraint? Surely what he is asking is over the top? Surely it is too much to stomach? Unwise? Undignified? Uncool? And so, says, John's gospel account, "because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Jesus confronted this on plenty of other occasions too. When people came to Jesus asking "What must I do to be saved into life in all its fullness?", he gave different answers to different people, not because he was being inconsistent, but because he consistently points out what it is that each of us is clinging to that prevents us from taking the deep dive into the depths of life and love.

To one he says, "Leave your boat and your nets and follow me." To others of us he says, "Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor and follow me." To others of us he says, "Stop clinging to your resentments and grudges, and follow me." To others of us he says, "Go and sin no more."

Jesus knows exactly what rubbish each of us will need to let go of before we can dive into life in all its fullness, but to every single one of us, what he calls us to will initially feel like too big an ask, like too much to stomach. "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

So Jesus turns to us and asks, “What about you? Do you also wish to go away?” The answer is not exactly full of enthusiasm, but sometimes, a commitment can stand without needing enthusiasm as well. It is Simon Peter who answers him, “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.”

“Lord, to whom can we go?” You get the feeling that those of us who have remained with Simon Peter have also looked around for an alternative. It’s like, “We’d go somewhere else if there was somewhere else to go, but nothing measures up. What you are asking seems too hard, but it is all we’ve got. No one else has the message of life in all its fullness.”

“Lord, to whom shall we go?” We sing those words every week. “Yours are the words of eternal life.” So here we are. It may not be cool. It may not seem wise or careful or normal. But it’s all or nothing.

Jesus calls us to jump in at the deep end, to take the big bite, to swallow the lot. Jesus offers himself to us, the bread of life, the Holy One of God, the One whose words give life in all its fullness. Don’t hold back. At his table here in a few minutes, the risen Jesus will again offer you the gift of himself as the bread of life. Let go of whatever is holding you back, and feast without restraint.