

**John 6: 51 - 60, 66 - 69**

**2 Cor. 4: 1 - 7**

**A number of years ago when I was on holiday in the Maritimes, I saw a sight which I have never forgotten. On the Bay of Fundy coast I found myself surprised and in awe of one of the mysteries of life.**

**No, it wasn't the might tides of that area that memorably astonished me - it was a particular group of migratory birds. In a very small area just north of Fundy National Park, over a period of perhaps three weeks in the year, could be seen flocks of up to 100,000 tiny sandpipers.**

**This particular species of sandpiper breeds and hatches its eggs up north in the Arctic.**

**But in late summer they travel to the north coast of South America.**

**On route, they stop to feed on tiny shrimps, found in the mud at low tide only in this area of Fundy Bay.**

**Each bird eats about 10,000 shrimps in order to double their weight and gain strength for their 60 hour nonstop flight.**

**To watch these thousands upon thousands of tiny birds, feeding on the beach was a fantastic experience.**

**They were very timid, easily frightened by bigger predatory birds.**

**When startled, they rose in a wave and flew together in their enormous numbers, rising and falling over the sea.**

**Although there were so many they flew gracefully, close to each other but never colliding, and managed somehow to avoid landing on the same spot on the beach as the bird next to them.**

**And my mind, as I watched them, was full of questions.**

**How do they know how to move in their thousands, yet in such order?**

**How do they know to come to this specific restricted location in order to find appropriate food and in sufficient quantities?**

**How do these tiny fragile birds fly over 4,000 kilometres to the Southern Hemisphere nonstop in 60 hours?**

**When I talked to a naturalist who was studying the birds, she said they did not know the answers to these questions.**

**To my mind it is one of the many miracles of nature, those mysteries of life with which we are surrounded and which we are never able to fully explain.**

**And yet, in this twenty first century, many people in our world seem to believe that eventually we will be able to find scientific answers to all the complicated questions of life.**

**Not only questions about the mysteries of nature but maybe also about life and death and human creation.**

**As if we can set down and explain everything in the same way as we answer exam questions.**

**What happened in 1776?**

**What is the second law of thermodynamics?**

**We want to analyze and computerize and be assured that eventually it will all come together, everything will be clear.**

**One writer has said: "The light of modern consciousness is not gentle or reverent, it lacks graciousness in the presence of mystery, it wants to unriddle and control the unknown".**

**And many people approach the Bible with this same attitude, thinking that if we search the Scriptures hard enough we will eventually know the answers to all the "God" questions.**

**What is God like?**

**Who was Jesus of Nazareth?**

**How exactly must we live our lives?**

**But the Bible does not do that - it does not always give us straightforward answers to our spiritual questions.**

**Just as we think we have grasped something, this insight leads to still more questions.**

**The more we search the deeper we get, but never has anyone reached the stage where they have the solutions to all the profounder questions of life.**

**In fact, people who smugly believe that they understand it all, who have all the religious answers, are more in error than those who question.**

**Not only that, they are shutting the door of their minds against the mysteries, the spiritual depths which can never be fully spelled out or completely explained.**

**This morning we read from John's gospel, the most difficult and complex of the four accounts we have of the life of Jesus.**

**This gospel is far from being obvious and transparent.**

**It is full of stories about conversations with people who are trying to understand who Jesus is, why he has come, what he is saying about himself, and human life, and God.**

**And the individuals who appear in John's gospel often get more confused, rather than less, when they question Jesus.**

**People come to him with questions looking for direct and simple answers.**

**How did you get from one side of the lake to the other?**

**Tell us exactly what God want us to do, how we are to live.**

**What sort of a sign can you give us to prove that what you are saying is true?**

**What do you mean by calling yourself 'bread from heaven'?**

**What on earth are you saying when you tell us to eat your flesh and drink your blood?**

Is it any wonder that his disciples say to Jesus: “This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?”

And they might have added - or even understand what you are talking about.

Jesus’ words are obscure, full of strange, unexpected phrases and curious twists.

It is not only the crowd in general, and the critics of Jesus who are baffled and confused, but even his own followers. And this passage we read today is typical of the picture of Jesus given us by John the gospel writer.

A Jesus whose words are not easily comprehended.

Earlier on, Nicodemus, the learned scholar, is puzzled when Jesus tells him “You must be born again” and that God’s Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will.

The Samaritan woman at the well doesn’t have a clue what Jesus means when he talks about ‘living water’.

And Jesus talks in mysterious ways about bread - such a common thing, a word we should understand very easily.

Yet Jesus takes the ordinary act of eating and drinking and gives it extraordinary meaning.

He links it with us becoming part of his life, and him becoming part of ours.

And even when we think we begin to grasp what this means symbolically, we still struggle to explain it.

Perhaps the only thing that comes through loud and clear is that there are no simple, straightforward answers.

It is not by mere intellectual knowledge that Jesus points us towards God.

As Jesus so often told people - our faith in God is not something we produce ourselves, it is a gift of God’s grace. That is faith’s mystery.

**Our mind may say to us - I'm having trouble figuring out all the answers.**

**But at the same time faith can assure us that God is calling us, we want to be part of a God/human relationship.**

**We long to know more - but this kind of 'knowing' is different of course, from intellectual 'knowing'.**

**Intellectual knowing comes when we can say - I really understand how this motor works, or I know the physical components of water, or the secret of a perfect chocolate cake.**

**But there's another kind of knowing which comes through our insight, our intuition, our gut feeling.**

**It comes perhaps when we listen to a wonderful piece of music, or look at a glorious sunset, or communicate deeply with a person we love.**

**We know that something within the experience has transformed us but we can't possible explain how or why.**

**The poets as always, are the best at expressing this.**

**Reflecting on the Biblical experience of Moses, Elizabeth Barrett Browning has said:**

**Earth's crammed with heaven**

**And every common bush afire with God**

**And only he who sees takes off his shoes**

**The rest sit around it, and pluck blackberries.**

**Faith - we can't explain it in intellectual terms, but it calls to us, it hangs on to us, it keeps us participating in the dialogue even when it's hard to understand.**

**It draws us to worship, Sunday by Sunday, pulls us towards the ultimate mystery that is God.**

**Faith is not the result of an intellectual pursuit of knowledge, but more the willingness to try and listen to what Jesus is saying to us.**

To remain part of the conversation, even when, as in those verses we read today, like the disciples we may find it difficult and perplexing.

We may not fully understand, but the words of Jesus nevertheless remain profoundly comforting and reassuring. “I am the bread of life - whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty... Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away...”

I can't fully explain Jesus' words in John's gospel to you. I don't believe there are just simple explanations.

What is required of us is our willingness to be open and to listen.

Even in the midst of our doubts and our questions.

Because faith is not an exam that we pass when we know 'enough'.

When I was in the Scottish highlands, occasionally we drove through one of those misty fogs common to the area.

And our life's spiritual journey is a bit like that experience.

Sometimes our vision is dim and obscure - we strain our eyes to find the way.

And then there can be those glorious occasions when the sun comes out and in the clear light we see right to the horizon.

At various times in our lives our faith journey experiences all these moments.

It is discovering more and more the spiritual dimensions of life which surround us but which we do not always clearly see and cannot ever fully know.

I have always been drawn to that aspect of reflective theology which we know as Celtic spirituality.

**Practiced by peoples of the British Isles for about 500 years between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans, it has been revived and rediscovered.**

**It reflects a gentle, mystical, affirmative and holistic faith.**

**A belief in the holy mysteries, not as problems to be solved, but realities to be contemplated.**

**A modern Celtic writer has said “So (if) at the end of my time I still find that I am asking questions, I should see that as a sign of maturity, and be happy to accept that I am not always going to have answers”.**

**It is the wonder of life that we live surrounded still by mystery, by things that we cannot fully comprehend.**

**But faith is our continued search for the One in whom we live and move and have our being.**

**And we can be sustained through this faith - knowing that the one assured thing is that it is God’s gift to us.**

**And so we say - Thanks be to God. Amen**