

BIBLE READINGS: Ephesians 6:10-20 John 6:56-69

SERMON

A certain young fair haired bloke calls his girlfriend and says, "Please come over here and help me. I have a jigsaw puzzle and I can't figure out how to get it started." His girlfriend asks, "What is it supposed to be when it's finished?" "I don't know," he replies. "Well, doesn't it have a box that it came in? Usually there's a picture on the front that shows you what it's supposed to look like." "Oh," he says, "let me see. Yes, yes. According to the picture on the box, it's supposed to be a rooster."

His girlfriend agrees to stop by and help with the puzzle. He shows her where he has spread the puzzle out over the table. She studies the pieces for a moment, looks at the box, and she turns to him and says, "First of all, no matter what we do, we're not going to be able to assemble these pieces into anything resembling a rooster." She takes his hand and says, "Secondly, relax. Let's have a cup of coffee, then ..." and she sighs, "then, let's put all these cornflakes back in the box."

Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, the pieces just don't fit. Life is a puzzle. Relationships are a puzzle. Faith is a challenge to understand and sometimes even what Jesus says to us in the Bible is a puzzle for us.

Now, expert jigsaw puzzle fans know that it's much easier to put the puzzle together if you can look at the picture on the box. The picture on the front gives a person a guide to making sense to all those hundreds of little, disjointed puzzle pieces.

Putting the pieces back together – that's what this morning's Gospel reading is all about. Jesus' words today about eating his flesh for food and blood to drink are just pieces of a bigger picture of Jesus' work of salvation. In our passage today, the Gospel writer John gives us some of the pieces of the "the big picture of God's salvation". In fact, that's what the entire Gospel of John is trying to do – put the pieces together for us so we can understand how God is at work in Christ Jesus redeeming and restoring the world.

Remember how John opens his Gospel? At the very beginning of the Gospel of John, he writes about Jesus saying, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And then John goes on to say of Jesus... and "In him was life and that life was the light of men." Two chapters later, John tells of Jesus' encounter with an elderly Pharisee named Nicodemus. When Nicodemus is slow to comprehend how he, an old man, can be born again, Jesus gives him an explanation – Jesus tries to put the pieces together for Nicodemus (and us) by saying, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

That's the big picture of John's Gospel and John can't stop talking about it. That's what the Gospel of John is all about. Time and time again throughout his writing, John says in effect, "here's the big picture. Here's how the pieces fit together. Look for Jesus and everything will fall into place. Look for Jesus and when you find him, the puzzle of life begins to take on some clarity."

As Jesus walked closer to Jerusalem his ministry which held such hope and promise at one time started to falter. His words become more and more harsh. His teachings almost impossible to bear. The same people who come to Jesus to be fed and to hear his preaching, do not want to hear those words of challenge and suffering. They want to be fed – they want a free meal. They want words of optimism, hope and easy discipleship. But Jesus will have none of that. It's the truth or nothing at all. Listen to what he says in verse 61: "Does this offend you," Jesus asks. "Because if it does, you might as well leave me too."

It is then that the disciple Peter, replies with one of the most beautiful statements in all of Scripture. "Lord," he says, "to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter knew what John was trying to convey in his Gospel writing. Peter knew that Jesus was the picture on the box, that Jesus was the key to making sense of the puzzles of life. That's why Peter could say: Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life."

A small boat makes its way across the angry waters of the Mediterranean Sea. On board is a devout Christian woman named Monica. Tossed about by the waves, the crew seeks to calm the fears of the passengers and pass slowly among them speaking calm, assuring words. But Monica needs no such assurance. In fact, in a while as the storm worsens, it is she who calmly promises the troubled sailors that everything will be fine.

For you see, Monica believed that God was with her as she made her way to Rome to visit her son, Augustine. She believed that her son needed her and that God would get her there to be with him. Awaiting his mother's arrival from Africa, Augustine was in a dangerous state of depression, depressed from his own search for meaning in life.

Augustine was born in 354 AD in a Roman province of North Africa. His father was a Roman citizen, an unbeliever and his mother a devout Christian woman. Even though he had been raised in the church, Augustine found the old Latin version of the Bible uninviting and so he looked elsewhere for truth. But everywhere he looked, he was always disappointed. A great reader and lifelong student, Augustine poured over the various philosophies of his day in a vain attempt to understand good and evil, sin and virtue, heaven and hell and find some meaning for life in the prevailing philosophies of the Roman empire. Unable to find any reason for life beyond himself, Augustine threw it all off and as a youth, left his home in North Africa, went to Rome and lived a wild, unrestrained life.

One day, his mother sent him a letter and suggested that he look into the teachings of Ambrose, a Christian bishop and writer. Tired and worn out by his constant pursuit for greater pleasure, Augustine turned to Ambrose's writings and suddenly Augustine found what he was looking for.

That all happened in the summer of 386 AD. Augustine was in the courtyard of his home in Rome, waging a spiritual debate with himself. Trapped by the sins of his youthful rebellion, he felt there was no way a righteous, holy God could receive a sinner such as he. As he argued with himself, suddenly, Augustine felt a voice speaking within him, saying, "Pick it up, my son. Pick it up. Read what I have said to you." So Augustine did just that. He went to his room, found the old Latin Bible his mother had given him and began to read it. And one of the first passages he read was a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans that went like this: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, without orgies or drunkenness, sexual immorality or debauchery, not in dissension or jealousy. Rather, clothe yourself in Christ Jesus, and do not think to gratify the desires of your sinful flesh." (Romans 13:13-14)

In his autobiography, Augustine would later write: "I neither wished nor needed to read any further. At once with the last words of that sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded my heart. And all shadow of doubt was dispelled from within me." The following Easter, Augustine was baptised. His mother, Monica, had just arrived from her treacherous journey by boat to be there with him at the service. And through his searching, Augustine embraced Christ. He went on to become one of the most influential thinkers in the history of the Christian church. His writings were especially important to Luther as Luther sought out God's truth for himself. Augustine saw what Peter had seen and what Luther discovered and what millions of people in every walk of life even today continue to see. He saw the picture on the box. He saw Jesus, who puts all the pieces together.

And so the question this morning is: Have you seen the picture? Is there a puzzle in your life that needs solving? Are there pieces of your life that need putting back together? The Gospel writer John suggests a way for us to do this. He tells us that Jesus is the answer to life's puzzles.

There is a real danger in living in Australia, in having been brought up in the church, in experiencing the blessings of a Christian family and home. The danger is that we can all too easily take our Christian faith for granted; that we will assume that to live a decent life is enough, to be a good citizen is to live as a follower of Christ. And yet, often nothing can be farther from the truth. Western values and Christian values are not always the same and are in fact, if we are honest with ourselves, often in conflict with each other.

That's why it's important to gather in worship. We don't go to church just to see our friends. We don't go for the morning tea after church, to hear some nice music, listen to a good sermon (hopefully) and get a pat on the back on our way out. We go to see the picture on the box; to let Jesus help us put the pieces of our lives together.

Many years ago Malcolm Muggeridge, did a TV documentary on Mother Teresa. When he met her, he found her so compelling that he titled the documentary, *Something Beautiful for God*. When he remarked to Mother Teresa on the fact that she went to mass every day at 4:30am, she replied, "If I didn't meet my master every day, I'd be doing nothing more than social work here." Later, Muggeridge would admit that this meeting with Mother Teresa changed his life. He went from a cynical agnostic to a believer in Christ because of her deep faith and trust in God. Later in his autobiography, Muggeridge would write: "She had such joy, such hope, such faith in God, that I was moved to discover if I could have something of what she had."

Mother Teresa lived her life so close to Jesus that it was impossible not to see Christ present in her work. And that's what worship is all about. There's an old story of a pastor doing a children's sermon and he holds up a picture of a squirrel. "What do I have here?" he asked, to which a little girl who had been listening to the minister's children's talks every week said, "Well, it looks like a squirrel, but it must be Jesus."

That little girl spoke more of the truth than she thought. For us to make sense of the puzzles that are our lives, we need to discover Jesus. He puts the pieces together for us. It is Jesus who makes sense of the suffering we experience. It is Jesus who gives clarity to a cloudy future. It is Jesus who helps us see the big picture and keep things in perspective in our own lives. And that's the bottom line of all the strange talk this morning about eating flesh and drinking blood to remain in Christ. Jesus is the one way to God. He is God present in our world and in our lives to help us discover what the Gospel writer John saw, what Peter and Augustine and Luther and Mother Teresa knew – "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."