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## To Whom Can We Go?

John 6.68

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday 27 August 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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As fresh-faced young undergraduates, the incoming class arrives at Duke to be surrounded by role models. In freshman week you can't move for Residence Advisers, level-headed seniors, campus ministers, student affairs staff and faculty, all saying reassuringly, 'trust me'. But I'm going to suggest one more role model for our class of 2010: a crocodile.

In the story Peter Pan we meet a character called Captain Hook. Captain Hook's hand has been replaced by a hook, after he had an encounter with a crocodile. The captain passes on this sage piece of advice: 'Never smile at a crocodile/No, you can't get friendly with a crocodile/Don't be taken in by his welcome grin/He's imagining how well you'd fit within his skin'. The crocodile enjoyed Captain Hook's hand so much that he has since been permanently on the look out for the rest of him.

I wonder whether you've ever tasted anything so good that you've spent the rest of your life trying to find that taste again. There's a story that's popular in Ireland of the man who is visited by a fairy godmother and granted three wishes. He didn't have to think long about the first wish. 'I'd like a glass of Guinness that refills as soon as I drink it,' he said. Sure enough, his wish was granted. After he'd enjoyed a couple of drinks and found the glass kept replenishing, the fairy godmother said to him, 'Don't forget you've got two more wishes'. The man looked at the constantly refilling glass and said, 'I'll have two more of those please.'

When you have truly found what makes your heart sing, there's no need to search or speculate about much else. The crocodile knew what he was looking for. Captain Hook's hand had tasted so good. So it was worth spending the rest of his days seeking the rest of him.

If you can relate to the crocodile, you can relate to the dynamics of John chapter 6. The chapter begins with Jesus feeding five thousand people, starting with a just few loaves and fishes. The people say, 'We like the taste of that: we'll have two more of those please'. Jesus says 'I can give you something more important than loaves and fishes'; and the crowd say 'Bring it on'. And Jesus then says these unforgettable words: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' I can't hear those words without the hairs standing on the back of my neck and my eyes beginning to fill with tears. If you've drunk in those kinds of words, if you've tasted a little bit of the Jesus who spoke them, you become a crocodile. You've enjoyed just a little part of Jesus and you're going to spend the rest of your life looking for the whole of him.

This is the good news. When Jesus breaks bread, there is more than enough for everybody. Then Jesus lays down his life, and himself becomes the living bread, broken for the life of the world. Yet even Jesus' death is not wasted, and his resurrection offers us the promise that we shall eat this bread with him for ever. I think I'll have a little bit more of that bread please. I think I'll never get tired of that bread. I think that bread is all I'll ever want. Give me this bread always.

But the Bible would be a very short book if that was all there was to it. Almost straightaway, people begin to find reasons why they'd like a second opinion. John chapter 6 presents us with two kinds of reasons, both of which are still very much with us. The first is, this Jesus is too ordinary. He's Joseph's son, you know, the one who graduated from Nazareth State University with a wood skills major and a GPA of 3.4. Played a couple of matches as a walk on for the sailing team and did a bit in religious life, the usual stuff. We still find Jesus a little ordinary. A lot of us long for truly dramatic visions or experiences or adventures or discoveries. Extreme sports can give you stirring feelings. Drugs can give you amazing hallucinations. Other religions can give you exotic insights or profound wisdom. Jesus sometimes feels just too ordinary to be the key to everything. The universe is massive and staggeringly complex. Sometimes it does seem curious to say it all comes down to this solitary historical figure 2000 years ago.

The second reason why people walked away from Jesus is the opposite of the first. They said he was too far-fetched. He wanted too much from them. He was too demanding. Yes, yes, yes, they said, we buy into this 'eternal life' thing and we're cool about this 'you will never be hungry' deal, but couldn't you just lay off the heavy stuff about washing one another's feet and giving all your money to the poor? Can't you realize that in the modern world everything's relative – no promises last for ever, no truth claims go much beyond rhetoric and some kind of bid for power, no one gets to have a monopoly on what's important?

The two reasons why people turned away from Jesus in Capernaum are pretty much the two reasons why people turn away from Jesus today. For some people Jesus is too plain ordinary – a simple historical figure cannot bear on his shoulders the destiny of the whole world. They say why not just accept he was an exceptional human being and have done with it. For others Jesus is too plain *extraordinary* – they say Christianity is all very well but it does expect too much. 'Allow me to make sure my appearance is perfect, allow me to get my achievements secured, allow me to get my affluence beyond any danger: now, yes, Jesus is quite a person and one day I must get around to thinking about the questions he asks of us.'

Every Christian knows what it means to think and feel these things some of the time. Many of us can look back on days, weeks or years when other things seemed more important or more true than Jesus. Maybe you are in one of those periods right now. But I want to remind you to be a crocodile. Remember the taste. Remember the joy. Savor the words 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' And just go heading off, slowly methodically, relentlessly, having had a taste of Jesus, and wanting to enjoy the rest of him. Be a crocodile.

Jesus squares up to the twelve disciples in today's gospel, and says, 'Are you turning away too?' Think about this powerful moment. If the disciples leave now, what becomes of the rest of the New Testament? Who witnesses the crucifixion, who meets Jesus after the resurrection, who founds the first churches, who writes the gospels? It's one of those cliffhanger moments in the Bible when everything hangs on the answer to the question. And Peter swallows deeply, and looks into Jesus' face, and says 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.' You're the only show in town. When you've seen what we've seen, discovered what we've discovered, shared what we've shared, tasted what we've tasted – nothing compares to you. Anything else is absurd.

You could call this the doggedness of belief. It's the stubborn conviction that the Jesus who said 'I am the bread of life' *is* the life of the world, that who ever comes to him *will* never be hungry and whoever believes in him *will* never be thirsty, even if they couldn't care less at the moment. Four years ago I was the priest of a socially disadvantaged parish in the east of England. Sometimes it seemed no one cared less about Jesus. I can remember Sunday mornings when I would arrive at 9.30 for the 11.00 service, set out the chairs and everything else, and wait. And sometimes at 10.55 I would still be the only one there, longing for someone to come and share the bread of life. I would wonder what I was doing, holding out for Jesus when no one seemed to want him. And these words of Peter were the words that kept me going: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.' You're the only show in town.

There are many words for the attitude that Peter's words represent. Doggedness is one. Stubbornness is another. Faithfulness sounds a bit better. Perseverance sounds a bit more pious. But the real word is love. This is what it means to love God – to follow him around like a crocodile seeking the best meal ever. And because it's about love, the pop artists have had plenty to say about it. 'To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him/Just to see him smile makes my life worthwhile/To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him/And I do.'

I want to close by saying some words directly to those of you who are new to Duke. You've come to a university that prides itself on teaching you how to think, and sometimes what to think. We have some wonderful thinkers at this university, and I trust you will grow by learning how they think and thinking alongside them. But this morning you have come to a place that wants to show you who to love. And I say to you: Love Jesus. Love him with all your heart and mind and soul and strength – the way he loves you. There may be times in the years ahead when some of your thinking comes to question some of your loving. Don't panic. Look around you now: you can see hundreds and hundreds of people who have been through the same thing. You may for a time

find Jesus just too ordinary, or for a time find Jesus just too demanding. Don't despair. You'll be in good company.

My prayer is that at the end of your time at Duke you'll be even more hungry and thirsty for Jesus than you are today. You'll have asked yourself many times 'To whom can we go?' You'll have had a look at a good number of those to whom we may turn, and you'll have made an informed judgement about who really does have the words of eternal life. I anticipate that the more you learn about the atom, or wave theory, or calculus, or the civil rights movement, or the nineteenth-century novel, or sustainable economic growth, the more you'll long for the food that never perishes, the drink that never runs dry. And it's just possible that on your last night at Duke, you'll remember the crocodile, and chuckle, and find that you are quietly singing to yourself, 'To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him ... and I do'.