

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B

August 26, 2018

First Reading – Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 34

Second Reading – Ephesians 5:21-32

Gospel – John 6:60-69

My dear people of God:

I pray that our first reading will inspire all of us TO STAND UP FOR GOD. Joshua called the people. The assembly came together in a solemn religious manner. Joshua spoke to them in God's name. His sermon consisted of (1) doctrine and (2) application.

(1) The doctrinal part was a history of God's mercies, the great things that He had done for His people, and for their fathers before them.

(2) The application of this history of God's mercies to them is an exhortation to serve God, in gratitude for His favor, and that it might be continued.

Joshua challenged the people: “...*decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD*” (Joshua 24:15)

The people decided in the affirmative: “*Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God*” (verse 18b). This should be our response also to the challenge.

Brothers and sisters: Joshua immediately pointed out that this was no easy decision. *Has it been made hastily, without full awareness of the “cost of discipleship”?* (verses 19-20) Israel's answer was firm: “*We will serve the LORD!*” (verse 21).

Joshua noted they themselves have sworn testimony to this covenant (verse 22a) and adjures them to obey (verse 23). Israel concurred on both counts (verses 22b and 24). It is interesting to note that this was:

- (1) a carefully exacted and carefully enacted covenant;
- (2) not a self-incriminating covenant, but a covenant done rather *in love*;
- (3) not a syrupy-sweet sort of puppy love, but rather the firm, sober-eyed, committed, considered covenantal kind of love.

For LOVE is the only genuine principle where all acceptable service of God can spring. The Father seeks only such to worship Him; to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Now, let us go to the Second Reading: While it is true that Ephesians 5:21-33 is often considered *crucial in understanding the obligations of husbands and wives in Christian marriages*, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is more of the love of Christ for His Church. The entire passage of **Ephesians 5:22-33** is introduced by a call to mutual submission: *“Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ”* in verse 21.

Brothers and sisters, I encourage you to study the structure of this passage and see more clearly Paul’s message. Paul’s main message here is not just about marriage; it is about Christ and the Church (verses 27 and 32). The point he is highlighting is that Jesus wants to sanctify the Church and present to Himself the Church in all her glory. This glorious message is lost when we persistently focus on the obligations of wives and husbands and try to interpret this passage only through the lens of pre-supposed gender roles.

Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant Church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25b-27).

This is the main point that Paul wants to communicate to us today. Paul makes this more clearly by adding: **I am speaking with reference to Christ and the Church**. This is the message we should be highlighting more. One day Jesus is going to present to Himself a sanctified and spotless Church, where you and I belong. Jesus stands up for His church. This is the glorious hope of every Christian man and woman.

Now, let us go the Gospel:

We have been reading from John's Gospel about the Eucharist for four Sundays now. Today, we find ourselves disturbed by some disturbing surprises. Throughout this chapter's discussion about the bread which gives life, Jesus' words have been greeted with misunderstanding, confusion, and objection from the crowd, referred to either simply as "*they*" or "*the Jews*." In verse 60, we hear about the reaction from the "*disciples*" (not to be equated with "*the twelve*" verse 67). We may expect better things from them. After all, they were the ones who sat together with Jesus from the beginning, who followed Jesus' instructions in gathering up the leftovers of the bread and fish, and who were rescued from the storm at sea by Jesus. Perhaps most importantly, we expect that "the disciples" belong to "*us*," and not to "*them*", whom we label as outsiders. Now, we are stunned when we hear that the disciples are now the ones who are bothered by what Jesus said. We may have been tempted to simply label the rest of the crowd as stubborn outsiders, but the reference to "*the disciples*" sounds uncomfortably close to home. In verse 61, the disciples begin to grumble or complain just as "*the Jews*" did in verse 41. Here, the problem seems not so much that the disciples have difficulty understanding what Jesus is saying; they understand quite well, but cannot believe and follow what Jesus has said. How often do we find the same to be true about ourselves?

As has been Jesus' habit throughout this conversation, He meets objections by *sharpening* the point of His message, raising the offense rather than softening it, and thereby bringing the conversation to a crisis. In verse 62, Jesus points to His "*going up*" or "*ascending*". Jesus claimed that He will return to the Father by being lifted up on the cross. If the disciples have been scandalized by what Jesus has said (that is, *that He is the bread that came down from heaven*), what will prevent them from being more scandalized when Jesus declares that He "*goes up*" via the cross? Will they be able to see the glory of God *there*?

Jesus' statement that the "flesh" is useless (verse 63) cannot be read as a rejection of bodily life or a denial of creation's goodness. After all, this is the Gospel which joyfully declared that "the Word became flesh" (1:14). Rather, "flesh" here indicates the normal way of seeing reality, the way of viewing life judged to be "sensible" by the world, which cannot see that eternal life comes through the exaltation of Jesus on the cross, and which cannot believe that the way to life is by participating in the death of Jesus. It is only the Spirit that can give life by making faith possible.

Please know that the issue raised here revolves around a division between those who believe and those who do not believe. Now, we realize that unbelief can be found not only among "them" those whom we easily label as outsiders). Unfortunately, unbelief is found also among us (and within us!).

Where will we find ourselves in this narrative? Are we the disciples who turn and leave, or those who with Peter confess that Jesus is the one - the only one - with the words of eternal life?

Now, allow me to bring you back to the beginning of Chapter 6. We began with a huge crowd that needed to be fed and was interested enough to track down Jesus across the lake, but soon became disenchanted and grumbling. Even many of His disciples who stayed around through His long sermon, in the end, cannot accept it. At the end of the chapter, only twelve are left, and even one of them will betray Jesus. The direction of chapter 6 is not, as far as "flesh" and blood is concerned, a promising trajectory.

Yet God is working in the midst of "apparent" failure and rejection. The Church is still called to see that it is in such places that the Word of Life is doing its work around us, among us, and within us. We may have the natural inclination to turn and leave, to avoid the difficult call and above all to avoid the cross. Yet the Word, the Spirit, and the Father continue to call, and enlighten, and draw us to life.

Peter's response to Jesus is not a word of despair or a statement that they will have "to settle for Jesus" because there is nothing else; no option. Peter and the others who remain have been given the gift of knowing that Jesus is indeed the ONE who can give genuine life.

Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, the paradox remains: faith only comes as the Father draws us, and yet Peter and the others (*and we too*) are asked for our response. Peter and the other apostles *"chose"* to remain, and yet the greater and prior reality is that they have been chosen (verse 70). The mystery of faith and unbelief is not answered by supposed solutions to the paradox, but by grateful confession that the Father has indeed drawn us to faith in Jesus, and thus to eternal life.

May we allow the Father to draw us to faith in His Son and stand up for His Son. Amen