

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

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

Joshua is the sixth book of the Old Testament and is named after the one to whom Jewish tradition attributes authorship. However, as we presently have it, it cannot be entirely his work as some passages point to events which occurred at a later date.

Joshua (Greek: *Jesus*, Hebrew: *Yeshua*) was the person designated by Moses to succeed him in the governing of Israel. Moses passed all his authority on to Joshua, with the exception of his priestly powers, which went to Eleazar. Joshua (the name means Yahweh is salvation) had his name changed from Hoshea (salvation) by Moses (Numbers 13:16). It was Joshua who led the Hebrews to victory over the Amalekites while Moses prayed (Exodus 17:8-16). He was elected as the tribe of Ephraim's representative in the group of 12 sent to reconnoiter the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:8). He and Caleb are the only people who were over the age of 20 when the Jews left Egypt who lived to enter the promised land; all the rest died in punishment for their infidelity (Numbers 14:30-38; 31:26-65; 32:13).

The book of Joshua falls naturally into two parts:

- 1) The crossing of the Jordan, the fall of Jericho, and the conquest of Palestine (Chapters 1 through 12); and
- 2) The division of the lands (Chapters 13 through 24). Today's reading comes from the last chapter of the book where Joshua addresses the people assembled at Shechem on the subject of fidelity to God's law.

24:1 Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem,

The name Shechem means "shoulders" because of its location between the shoulders of Mt. Ebal to the northwest and Mt. Gerizim to the southwest. The shrine there may have contained the Ark of the Covenant but it is not clear.

summoning their elders, their leaders, their judges and their officers. When they stood in ranks before God,

This is probably an allusion to the Ark of the Covenant.

2a Joshua addressed all the people: ¹⁵ If it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve,

Choose – A choice between Yahweh and other gods.

the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling.

Judges 1:1 through 3:6 tells us the Amorites still occupy most of the land.

As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”¹⁶ But the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD for the service of other gods.¹⁷ For it was the LORD, our God, who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery. He performed those great miracles before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among all the peoples through whom we passed.^{18b} Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

This affirmation expresses the essence of Israel as a confederation whose principle unity was religious: worship of Yahweh and Yahweh alone. They are a covenant people.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 5:21-32

This is our last reading from the letter to the Ephesians during Cycle B. During the past four weeks we have learned of the Call to Unity, Interior Renewal, Christian Virtues, and the Chaste Life of the Children of God. This week we hear about Christian Family Life. The Apostle explores what being Christian means in the context of husband-wife relations and this is our subject for today. This teaching of Scripture has been the subject of much discussion of late; especially among the Southern Baptist Convention, which has recently adopted it as a rule of faith. Parent-child relations are addressed in 6:1-4 and are recommended reading. The supposition here is that both husband and wife are Christians (1 Peter 3:1-7 addresses the situation of a Christian wife and a pagan husband).

²¹ Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.

This saying announces a principle which is applied to relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave. Christ’s self-sacrificing love for others (Ephesians 5:1) is now the model for home (and Christian) life.

²² Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.

This is a new motivation. Relationships between Christians must be accompanied by a reverence for Christ’s fellow members; after all, we are all members of the body of Christ (there is a parallel text in Colossians 3:18).

“The union of Christ and the Church is holy. So is the proper union of husband and wife holy. Just as a congregation of heretics, however, cannot rightly be called the Church of

Christ and cannot have Christ as its head, so it is that the union between husband and wife cannot be truly called holy if there is a disregard for the way of life taught by Christ" [Saint Jerome (A.D. 436), *Commentaries On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 5,22-23].

²³ For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. ²⁴ As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her

Christ gave Himself for others (Galatians 2:20; the parallel text is Colossians 3:19). In these verses about wives and husbands the apostle has developed an analogy whereby husband represents Christ and wife represents church. This teaching has its roots in the Old Testament where the relationships between Yahweh and His people are expressed, through the preaching of the prophets, in terms of the relationships between husband and wife. The husband loves his wife truly, he is completely faithful to her (Hosea 1:3; Jeremiah 2:20; Ezekiel 16:1-34). God is forever faithful to the love He has shown Israel, and He is ever ready to pardon her (Isaiah 54:5-8; 62:4-5; Jeremiah 31:21-22) and to re-establish his Covenant with the people (Isaiah 16:5-63). Jesus describes himself as the bridegroom (Matthew 9:15; John 3:27). He brings into being the New Covenant, which gives rise to the new people of God, the Church (Matthew 26:26-29). The relationship between Christ and the Church appears in the New Testament in terms of husband and wife.

²⁶ to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, ²⁷ that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

"By what 'word' is she 'washed?' 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' He did not simply bathe her; He adorned her, making her glorious, having no spot or wrinkle or anything lacking. Let us not seek from the wife something she does not have to give. For you see the pattern: the Church has received everything from Christ" [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 20,5,27].

²⁸ So (also) husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

Genesis 2:24. Saint Paul is not just using Christian marriage as a comparison to explain Christ's relationship with the Church: he is saying that the relationship is actually embodied and verified between Christian husband and wife. This means that marriage between baptized people is a true sacrament, as the Church has always taught. A covenant relationship exists between them just as it does between God and His Church.

³² This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

Gospel - John 6:60-69

Today we complete our study of John's presentation of Jesus' bread of life discourse; a study that has taken us 4 weeks to cover 46 verses; a study that not only the Catholic Church, but the Episcopal and Lutheran churches consider important enough to devote these four weeks to once every three years. The point of correlation between the 1st reading and this gospel reading is the necessity of making the decision now as to whether you will follow the Lord or not – the moment of truth has arrived.

⁶⁰ Then many of his disciples who were listening said,

Not just the apostles, but many others as well. This group was described in John 6:22 as a crowd. This event is taking place very shortly after the feeding of the five thousand (and the four thousand if you proceed to this point from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark) and many were attracted to Jesus.

“This saying is hard;

Jesus has made many claims: He is the Messiah, or at least a prophet – but they know his family; He is the Bread of Life – but He looks like a human; He gives eternal life – but this is something only God can do; you must eat His flesh – but this is cannibalism; you must drink His blood – but this is forbidden by the Law; and to top it all off, He has said all this in the form of a covenant oath!

who can accept it?”

Break out the straight jacket, this guy's gone off the deep end! This sounds like the ravings of a mad man!

⁶¹ Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, “Does this shock you?”

Do you think this is hard to believe?

⁶² What if you were to see

If you think that was hard, try this one on for size! You haven't even heard the hardest part yet! Jesus doesn't make any attempt to go back and smooth things out; correct misunderstandings, because they don't misunderstand. They simply don't believe what they are hearing. Recall, back in verse 29 Jesus said “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” If you don't believe in Him, then you won't believe what

He is saying. The role of the prophet, which is who some think He is, is to speak God's words. Some in the crowd don't believe and now He is going to make one final appeal; an appeal that will separate the wheat from the chaff, one final prophetic image. Some on the borderline will be convinced and the unbelievers are going to fall away.

the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?

Predicts His own ascension. To the Jewish listener this would most likely recall the assumption of Enoch (Genesis 5:24), Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), or Moses who according to Hebrew tradition was taken to heaven by God after his death which is why his grave has never been found (Deuteronomy 34:6). Any one of these three instances would have called to mind a prophet; someone sent by God, someone who spoke God's words.

63 It is the spirit that gives life,

It is the grace of God, given by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that gives a spiritual life (2 Corinthians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 15:45-47; John 3:6).

while the flesh is of no avail.

A body without a spirit is dead, a corpse. Without the Holy Spirit, they are spiritually dead. Note that He doesn't say "my flesh" which is the subject of the Eucharistic passage, but "the flesh" of John 3:6 and 8:15. The hearers have continually concerned themselves with manna for the body rather than food for the soul.

The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

"Believe in Him whom He has sent," "eat My Flesh," "drink My Blood". If you believe, then you will be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8). If you eat and drink His Body and Blood, you will receive everlasting life. Jesus is alive, His Flesh and Blood are not separate (a sign of death); both are present in the Eucharist. His Body and Blood cannot be separated; He has ascended.

64 But there are some of you who do not believe."

Jesus acknowledges their unbelief. He doesn't try a new approach to convince them. There is only one approach and understanding; either you believe it or you don't.

Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him.

Judas was one of the unbelievers, one who denied the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

65 And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father.”

God’s grace is necessary in order to have faith and understand (Isaiah 54:13). Jeremiah 31:33-34 has the same theme which accompanies the promise of the new covenant. It is a free gift but you have to be open to receive it.

66 As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of souls left; turned their backs on Jesus and eternal life. If Jesus had not been speaking literally, this was His last chance to correct their misunderstanding. Since He didn’t, we have absolute assurance that their literal understanding is the correct one. This is the only incident recorded in Holy Scripture where anyone stops being a follower of Jesus for a reason of doctrine.

67 Jesus then said to the Twelve,

Jesus addresses all the Apostles directly.

“Do you also want to leave?”

He doesn’t say “They misunderstood me, go and bring them back so I can explain it to them”. When He spoke in parables to the people, He explained everything to the Apostles in private (Mark 4:34). Here, He doesn’t attempt to change His teaching or explain it further; even to His most intimate friends. Instead, He simply asks if they have so little faith that they will leave too.

68 Simon Peter answered him,

Peter, chosen by Jesus to be the chief Apostle (Matthew 16:19), acts as spokesman for the entire group.

“Master, to whom shall we go?”

If we had a choice, we would leave too, but there is no other choice. We know you have come from God. You speak the words of God (John 3:34; 17:8). We don’t fully understand your message, but we have enough faith in You because of He who sent You that we will stay with You.

You have the words of eternal life.

You have given us God’s promise of eternal life. “Eat My Flesh, drink My Blood,” these actions truly give us eternal life.

69 We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

This is not necessarily a Messianic title. Prophets were also given this title; but He certainly was sent by God. Although the Apostles have not yet come to know Christ in all His fullness, they are on the way to this knowledge. They have not only seen Him, but realize that He has been sent by God and because of that they believe everything He has said; not fully understanding, but accepting it because of their faith in Him (verses 37 and 40).

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