

Twenty First Sunday of Ordinary Time August 23, 2015

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18; Ephesians 5:21-32; John 6:60-69

Faith, a gift of God, serves to lift up our soul and spirit above material and corporeal contingencies. It is to this supernatural attitude that Jesus tries to lead his disciples. Faith is a supernatural virtue which resides in our intellect: faith requires some human support, that of our human knowledge, a knowledge which may consist of simple ideas, but which is often made up of more or less elaborate judgments. Faith is always a matter of choice. We choose to believe in persons, in institutions, in values and causes. All our real and good relationships, our good commitments arise out of such choices. This process of faith invariably involves certain amount of risk. To believe in nothing and go ahead as if nothing exists is the end of the path and thus a type of death. Our life in order to progress demands a risk of each one of us. We read in the book of Joshua today that he invites the tribe of Israel to choose faith and commitment to each other and to God. Their passage from slavery to freedom is well in the past and new generations need to make this story their own. They are given now a challenge by Joshua to reconsider their common history and recommit to their faith in the new land. In the Gospel we have Peter who makes the choice and the commitment on behalf of the disciples in a time of change and tension. He sees the wavering of their faith and commitment to Jesus and moving away from him and speaks boldly on behalf of the twelve of their loyalty and faith in him. In the second reading Paul tells the members of the church to be subordinate to one another. The directive is especially realized in the mutual love of spouses in marriage.

In the first reading of today, Joshua declares that he and his household serve only the Lord. The passage tells us that the people of God had just entered the Promised Land. For all outward appearances the conquest of Canaan was complete. The people already living there had their own gods, the gods who may have looked very attractive to the Israelites. Joshua has called together the elders, leaders, judges and scribes of Israel and presented them with a choice: either they could continue to serve the God who brought them out of Egypt and through the desert to the land where they were now settled, or they could adopt the gods of the Amorites whose land they had conquered for themselves. The choice was very crucial in the sense that the people had already shown their infidelity to God and to Moses. Under the leadership of Joshua and at the threshold of Promised Land they had to make the choice. Of course there was no real choice for them. They are told how their ancestors served gods beyond the river and died. The gods of Amorites were powerless before the God of Israel. He is the Lord God who freed them from slavery, did great signs, and protected them all the way in the desert. He is the same Lord God who brought their ancestors, including each and every one of them out of the kingdom of darkness. The people responded that he is truly their God. Joshua tells them that he is the same compassionate Lord God who, calls for their fidelity and they must remain faithful to him.

In today's second reading Paul shows the Ephesians the right way, namely of unity with each other in Christ. He tells them to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven them. Christ emptied himself even to death out of love for his Father and his brothers and sisters. Therefore it was not surprising that Paul would tell Christians to be subordinate to one another. In the light of Paul's statement about Christ, it becomes clear that husbands are to be just as subordinate to their wives as wives to their husbands, just as Christ

loved the church and gave himself up for her. As the Church is subject to Christ, the husband is subject to his wife and wife to the husband. The husband will fulfill his role as the head when he serves his wife just as Christ gave himself in service to the building up of the church. All these truths have been revealed to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the writing of the sacred Scriptures. While everyone is subject to someone of higher authority, this does not give the authority to the Church to abuse its power, or to the husband to abuse his power. In love, all are called to grow in holiness as brothers and sisters in Christ. The Christians are to grow in holiness so the husband can present his wife to God in a beauty that is equal to the splendor in which Christ will present the Church to the heavenly Father, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind.

In the narrative Jesus the Bread of Life, John presents to us the Eucharist as the source of summit of our faith. It began with the multiplication of loaves and fish which satisfied the physical hunger of people. Now Jesus offers to satisfy their spiritual hunger where he prepares to give his own body and blood as their food and drink. This leads to the murmurs of objection among the multitude, the ordinary people. How could this man they said give them his own flesh to eat? They were unable to accept this and Jesus did not go to explain it to them either. He simply demanded faith in his word. He had come down from heaven and he was more than a mere man. He is also God and he had the words of eternal life. Today's reading gives us the objections among his disciples, the outer band of followers who had been continually with him for some time now. They were a group distinct from the Apostles. Their reason for objecting was the same as that of the multitude for they considered him as a mere man. He knew their thoughts easily and told them that some of them did not believe in him. But he made no attempt to remove their obstacle. He simply referred to his divine origin and the divine knowledge he promised.

John in his Gospel is fully aware that that the teaching of Jesus about himself as the bread of life was not easy for people to understand and accept, even his own disciples. The gospel passage of today presents to us some of the responses that emerged. Much like the Israelites in the desert, some of the disciples complained about the incomprehensibility of what Jesus had just said. Others went beyond complaining to expressing their disbelief to what they had just heard. Finally we are told that some of the disciples quit following Jesus and rejected him over the claims he made about being the bread that came down from heaven. Jesus was asking them whether they would accept this offer of his and whether they truly appreciated of the communion and oneness with him. He clearly indicated to the disciples that Eucharist means being one with him and united to him. The disciples were being presented with a crucial choice to accept Jesus or to reject him. It was indeed a matter of challenge. Jesus did not indeed appear shocked at the negative response from some of his disciples. He accepted them as they were. John presents Jesus to us as the person who knew everything even to the point of betrayal. Jesus had presented his followers the challenge to move from understanding himself and the world merely from a natural point of view.

At this juncture Jesus turned to the inner circle of the Twelve to whom he had been talking at a deeper level and giving his followers a glimpse of who he is and what he is about on a supernatural level. The Twelve are portrayed as accepting the teachings of Jesus and confessing that he is the Holy One of God. There is no indication that they were more intelligent than the other disciples but it is obvious that they have been given that initial grace of faith that is

required for being able to believe in Jesus. His teaching was difficult and he knew that it would take more than a normal understanding to grasp the matter. They needed the faith which is the gift of the Father. This initiation to faith can come only from him through the Spirit. Without the grace of faith and openness the words of Jesus the teachings of the Lord make no sense. So he turned to his close inner circle of disciples and asked them whether they too wished to go away from him. Peter, speaking on behalf of the Twelve makes the profession of faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." There was the love expectation and intimate support for Jesus and Peter showed his own loyalty and that of his companions. Jesus was everything to the Apostles and to those who believed in him.

We are all members of the Body of Christ. As such, our membership requires that we tend to those under our authority in the same way as we take care of our bodies. No person hates his or her own body. They nourish it and tenderly care for it, just as Christ does with the Church. Hence Jesus says that unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, we will have no life within us. Through these words, Jesus was preparing the way for the revelation of his continued Divine Presence in the world through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus was inviting them to a new life through his very person but many failed to understand him and left him. But those who had faith in the Lord, those who had been called by the Father, they trusted in Jesus. They trusted that in time, their hearts would be open to what Jesus was saying. We know how shocking and difficult are the words of Jesus if they were heard literally, telling the disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Now, not only the religious leaders but Jesus' own disciples are deeply scandalized as they found this teaching too difficult to accept. It is Jesus' dramatic way of saying that we must accept him totally, without any conditions or reservation. His thoughts and attitudes, his values, his life-view must become totally ours. Above all we are to identify with him in the offering of his flesh and the pouring out of his blood on the cross, the symbol of God's unutterable love for us.

John the Evangelist in the gospel wants to make it clear to his own community and ultimately even those who were physically present with Jesus and had heard him teach had difficulty in believing him. We today are at no disadvantage because we are attempting to follow Jesus centuries after he was on earth. The key was never his physical presence. The key has always been the faith and from that perspective we are absolutely at no disadvantage. Jesus had explained and described what communion with his Body and his Blood consisted of, and what its fruits were: to live in him in his own divine life which he himself gets from his Father. Jesus had said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me." The Eucharist, therefore, is this: a Mystery of Faith. The Eucharist is that divine reality which unites, or which divides. It unites if one believes in it, and it divides if one does not believe in it, or if one does not believe in it correctly. Faith is a supernatural virtue which resides in our intellect: faith requires some human support, that of our human knowledge, a knowledge which may consist of simple ideas, but which is often made up of more or less elaborate judgments. Faith, a gift of God, serves to lift up our soul and spirit above material and corporeal contingencies. It is to this supernatural attitude that Jesus tries to lead his disciples.

In the holy Eucharist with which this chapter is closely linked, we recognize in our going to communion the accepting of that challenge to be totally one with Jesus. It is not enough for him to come to us; we also have to go all the way to him, with him. When the Body of Christ is offered to us, we respond with a total act of faith in the Real Presence of Jesus and a total commitment to the community we serve. Only with a deep, unconditional trust in Jesus will we have that deeper insight into the real meaning of Jesus' words. It requires an absolutely open mind ready to receive him fully. This indeed is a gift of God who alone can attract us and keep us closer to him. Like the twelve disciples who chose to stay with the Lord and made their total commitment, so also let us make our commitment to him to say, Lord to whom shall we go; you have the words of eternal life.

Down the centuries we have people who have taken the risk and made their commitment for the Lord in the midst of tensions and wavering of faith. We need to have the faith of Mary and Paul and the great saints of old who had remained loyal to the divine call even at the cost of risking their lives. Today they all invite us to reflect and choose continuously our faith and trust in Jesus. As believers we stand with Joshua and Peter and others in accepting that risk in our ongoing adventure of faith and hope. Thus, concerning the Eucharist, faith needs to know that what we call the Body of Christ is seemingly bread, and what we call the Blood of Christ is seemingly wine. But as soon as faith receives from the intellect the divine presence and the Eucharist we are fully transformed. All those who had faith in the Lord were the persons who had been personally called by the Father. They trusted in Jesus and received eternal life from him. They trusted that in time, their hearts would be open to what Jesus was saying and believed in him.

A Church goer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all." This started a real controversy in the "Letters to the Editor" column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone wrote this clincher: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this. They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!"

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