



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Twenty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 26, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

In today's readings, two groups of people are called upon to make a decision: to accept what God has offered them, or walk away.

In the first reading, Joshua, the chosen successor of Moses has gathered the Israelites. Joshua had led them into the Promised Land, a place full of people with different ways and new gods. Joshua asked his people to decide if they would continue to be God's people or would they forget about God, assimilate into their new home, and serve the gods they found there. The Israelites recalled all that God had done for them and declared their intention to honor their covenant with God and serve him alone.

Today's Gospel depicts the aftermath of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. Jesus told the crowds that had followed him that he was sent by God to give them eternal life. The crowds were attracted to Jesus as he healed the sick and filled thousands of hungry stomachs with bread and fish. They had witnessed his power and had wondered if he was the Prophet-Messiah. When Jesus spoke of living bread, they were attracted to that, too, but when Jesus said that to have this bread, they must eat of his flesh and drink his blood, many people walked away.

In a similar way, the words of St. Paul in today's letter to the Ephesian might confuse and offend modern sensibilities who hear and interpret them in a literal way. Paul was advocating that the people of God regard and care for each other with the same extraordinary love and reverence that Jesus shows his church. Paul's instructions called Christians to a higher standard of conduct than what they saw in the world around them.

Jesus knew that his words had shocked the people. He had given them a glimpse of a heavenly mystery—of God sharing his very own life with humanity. This mystery could not be understood by human understanding but only through the Spirit. Those who did not hear Jesus through the Spirit were troubled by his words and left him. Only the Twelve remained with Jesus.

Today's Scriptures offer an opportunity for reflection in our own day. With a scandal-ridden Church, many might also be struggling with the decision to stay with the Church or leave. The words of Scripture speak to the way we should regard and treat each other, and challenge us on the ways we all fall short. As human beings we struggle to understand the teachings and demands of Jesus, but like Peter, we believe that Jesus alone offers eternal life. As we place our trust in him, we trust that his Spirit is sufficient to guide our Church into repentance and wholeness. Like the Israelites and the disciples, we are challenged to commit ourselves to serving the Lord, until our house truly reflects the love of Jesus.

Sunday Readings and Background

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

We will serve the Lord!

- The Book of Joshua describes the story of the Israelites as they take possession of the Promised Land.
- The people are a new generation of Israel.
- Joshua gathers the people in the center of the land at Shechem to renew their covenant commitment to God.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 34: 2-3, 16-17 18-19, 20-21

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II: Ephesians 5:21-32

Christ loves us as spouses love each other.

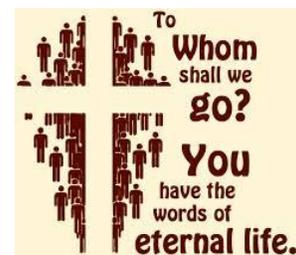
- The reading from the Letter to the Ephesians describes the mutual respect that should prevail in ordinary human relationships because of the new life shared in Christ.
- The relationship of marriage is particularly significant because the marriage relationship stands as a symbol of the covenant relationship between the people and God.
- The fidelity and love between wife and husband symbolize the fidelity and love between God and the people and between Christ and his Church.

Gospel: John 6:60-69

You have the words of eternal life.

- Jesus' divinity is clearly implied in the Gospel of John.
- In today's passage the disciples are faced with a choice.
- Peter, representing the Twelve, affirms their decision to stay with Jesus.

Reprinted with permission. LifelongCatechesis.OSV.com



Coming to Commitment

A few months ago, a group of sisters gathered at their motherhouse on the feast of St. Joseph, a traditional day of recess from Lent. After a beautiful liturgy, someone remarked, “We forgot to renew our vows on our feast day!” One of the young sisters standing nearby asked wryly, “Are you afraid that our octo and nonagenarians are getting ready to leave the community?”

Hearing the interchange, I recalled that when my parents celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary they were glad for a blessing but said they had pronounced their vows in 1940 once and for all — repetition wouldn’t strengthen their meaning. On the other hand, when my aunt was celebrating her jubilee as a Religious of the Good Shepherd, the sister sharing her pew offered her a copy of the formula to renew her vows to which Aunt Marie replied in a most unobtrusive stage whisper, “I have repeated them every morning for 65 years. I know the words!”

In today’s first reading, Joshua gathered his people and called them to make a solemn commitment. They were to proclaim publicly whether or not they wanted to serve the Lord who freed and fed them and brought them to the Holy Land. They swore enthusiastically that they would always serve the Lord their God. We know they kept that commitment as perfectly as we keep ours.

When Jesus finished explaining that he was the bread given for the life of the world, the majority of his disciples came to the conclusion that it was too much for them to accept. Some of them apparently cherished the concept of a more mysterious God who stayed on the heavenly side of creation, a God they could worship from a safe, cultic distance. Others realized that the God Jesus re-presented in his own total self-giving could only be served in imitation of that same love. They found that too costly. John explained their reactions by saying simply, “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life.”

John doesn’t explain how that made Jesus feel. He tells us only that Jesus knew that some disciples lacked faith and that one would betray him. Of course, Jesus told his disciples that they couldn’t come to him without the help of God’s grace, but even with that, did he expect so many to walk off?

John implies that when Jesus looked to see who remained, the crowd had shrunk to a mere twelve. One can only imagine the look on his face and his tone of voice when he asked, “Do you also want to leave?” In all of John’s Gospel, this is probably Jesus’ most vulnerable moment. It was also the natural result of offering himself for others: all he could do was offer, the results depended on their openness to the Father’s gifts.

Peter spoke for his companions and, having learned from the Master, he responded to Jesus’ question with a question of his own: “To whom shall we go?” Picking up on one of the most promising phrases from Jesus’ discourse, he added, “You have the words of eternal life.” Then, giving words to the process the disciples had been going through, Peter said, “We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

Of course, Peter didn’t fully understand the implications of what he said. Nevertheless, what he said committed him and his companions to continue as Jesus’ disciples with all the unpredictable repercussions that would entail.

We have been contemplating Jesus as the bread of life for five weeks. That’s almost as long as Lent. We have had time to ponder how God has shown us love and care from the time of the first Passover until today. As we reach the end of this immersion into the Gospel of John, the Scriptures invite us to stand with Joshua’s Israelites and Jesus’ disciples as they are asked about their commitment. After remembering so much about God’s goodness, after hearing the promise of life-giving bread and being reminded that the Father draws us to Christ through our deepest human longings, it is time to review our own fundamental allegiance.

Are we ready to renew our deeply personal, public dedication to Christ? If so, we might use the profession of faith as a solemn reaffirmation of our commitment. We could allow the procession at Communion to serve as a communal reenactment of the pledge Joshua called forth from his people. Even making the sign of the cross with full awareness can reinforce our conscious decision to belong to Christ. Most of all, our “amen” to receiving the Eucharist proclaims, as St. Augustine taught, that we are willing to receive what we are and be what we receive.