

Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2009

A life fully lived requires a commitment of faith and love in order to succeed at it. Without a minimum of trust and love, it is impossible to live together. All the readings of this Sunday draw our attention to the importance of faith-love commitment as fundamental to the growth of our relationships with the Lord and with one another.

The first reading refers to the aftermath of Moses' death as Joshua took over the leadership of Israel. Once the Hebrews arrived in the promised land, they were confronted with the reality of pagan gods of the people they invaded. The temptation was such that they could run the risk of becoming like them and of forgetting their own identity.

It was at that time that Joshua convoked the people of Israel at Shechem and enjoined them to renew their Covenant with God. They had to clearly state if they wanted to remain the people of God or to be like anybody else. They were to choose between God and the gods of pagans.

In order to help them come to a right decision, Joshua reminds them of the great deeds God performed for them as he liberated them from Egypt. He invites them to renounce false gods and make an ultimate choice in favor of God. In fact, what Joshua wanted was to make Israel more aware of their commitment toward God and to behave accordingly. Following the determination of Joshua, himself, who chose to serve the Lord with the whole of his family, all the people, like one man, responded in the same way.

The choice of God and his beloved Son is what Jesus asks also of his followers in today's Gospel. We know already that when Jesus declared to be the bread that comes down from heaven and without which there cannot be life for the world, both Jews and some of his disciples were shocked. Some others stopped going with him and returned to their former ways of life.

The reason why these people rejected the message of Jesus is simply that they approached him from the outside and not from within. It is not the human approach that can help us understand the mystery of Jesus' life. It is only in faith that we can understand that Jesus is our life and in him we are alive. As Jesus himself says, "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life".

What Jesus wants to say is that the all important thing is the life-giving power of the Spirit and not the flesh. That Spirit is received when we accept and believe in Jesus. In other words, no one can accept Jesus unless moved by the Spirit of God to do so; but it is a Spirit we receive only when we open our hearts to the truth of Jesus' message. That is the circle of spiritual life: from Jesus' word to his Spirit; from the Spirit to the truth of Jesus' message and vice versa.

When Jesus speaks about the flesh that cannot give life, he is not despising the body. It means only that the most important thing is the spirit in which any action is done. The real value of anything depends on its aim. For instance, if we eat simply for the sake of eating, that is just gluttony. In the end, eating in this way will do us more harm than good. But if we eat in order to be in good health and fulfill our duties, then, food has its real significance. If people do sport simply for the sake of sport, that is just a waste of their time. But if they spend their time in sport in order

to keep their body fit and to do the work of God, then, sport is important. In that sense, the things of the flesh gain their value from the spirit in which they are done.

In other words, given that Jesus' words are "spirit and life", it follows that Jesus alone can tell us what life is. He alone can put in us the spirit in which we must live it. He alone can give us the strength we need to live it. After all, life takes its value from its purpose and its goal, which Christ.

If, then, Christ is the purpose and the goal of our lives, why are there people who reject him? The reason is the height of Christ's moral demand, which is to surrender to him in faith. And that is not easy; it challenges the way people have chosen to live their lives and actually live it. The most difficult thing for many people is not to listen to the words of Jesus, but to accept that what Jesus says is true and to act consequently.

That is why the core of today's message is how we can renew our commitment of faith and love toward God and our brothers and sisters so that we come to live as Jesus demands of us. Today is the time of choice. Remember that, like Joshua in the first reading, Jesus respects your freedom of choice. He will never force you to believe in him. That choice is yours; it is in your hands and depends on you alone.

Peter and his friends have made the choice of sticking around and with Jesus. To be Christian is, like Peter, to chose Jesus and recognize in him the Holy one of God. It means also to stay close to Jesus, no matter how challenging might be the circumstances surrounding our life. As Peter says, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life". Like Peter and the apostles, take advantage of this time to renew your promise of baptism, your pledges made to people and your commitment of marriage life, etc.

I am not talking about marriage understood as a one-sided relationship or a relationship of slavery of a partner toward another. It is not about marriage understood as a control of a partner over another. It is all about love; not a selfish love, but a sacrificial love, of loving as Christ loved the Church, of giving everything for the good of the partner as Christ gave himself for the Church, of always looking for the good of the partner as Christ did for the Church. There is no love without faith; there is no faith without love. These words are important today; they correct the misinterpretation of the words of St Paul quoted most of the time out of their context.

We pray that the Lord help us to renew our commitment of faith and love toward him and one another. May God bless you all!

Joshua 24, 1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Ephesians 5, 21-32; John 6, 60-69



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