

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of commitment in our undertakings. They highlight, in particular, the duty we have to fulfill our engagement before God and before our fellows. They invite us to realize that trust and commitment are keys for a successful relationship with God and with one another.

The first reading describes the aftermath of the death of Moses when Joshua took over the Israel army and led the people of Israel to the Holy Land. As the text reports, the people came very quickly to overlook who they were, how they got there, as well as the covenant they made with God.

In that context, Joshua invited them to renew their covenant with God and to pledge to serve God alone. Joshua himself gave an example of how, with his household, he has decided to serve only the God who saved them and not another one. The people, in turn, responded unanimously with a solemn pledge to God, reminding them of all the miracles and great signs he had accomplished for them in his history.

What is behind this text is the idea that the identity of the people of God is constantly threatened by the ambient environment in which they live. It is, then, their duty to continually renew their commitment and to pledge their faithfulness to God. Without that commitment, our faith runs the risk of being at the margin of what God expects from us. Another idea is the truth that there is a permanent temptation before God's people to behave like anybody else. For that reason, they have to be vigilant and detect such mechanism in their lives. They have to choose God and not the human gods

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as the apostles affirm their trust in Jesus, while everyone else was leaving because he said that he was the bread of life that came down from heaven.

First of all, the Gospel says that when some of the disciples heard these words of Jesus, they were shocked and skeptical. But, Jesus did not back off. On the contrary, he affirmed that they could even see more than that. After all, he says, it is not the flesh that gives life, but the Spirit. Consequently, his words are Spirit and life. But he knew who would not believe in him, because they had not been attracted by his Father.

As some of his disciples stopped following him because of that, Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them if they would like to leave him, too. But, Peter answered, on behalf of the group, that they have no other place to go because he has the words of eternal life. For that reason, they believe in him and are convinced that he is the Holy One of God.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing I want to highlight is about the crisis of the Eucharist. When many of the disciples of Jesus were shocked and declared that his saying was hard and unacceptable, they were expressing the crisis in which they were plunged.

Remember that up to now Jesus was popular to the point that people wanted to make him a king. Suddenly all that stops because he says that he is the bread of life come down from heaven. This is a moment of crisis, but it is a crisis around the person of Jesus who is at the center of the Eucharist.

That crisis is not something of the past; even today it happens in our midst. For instance, some people do not believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Others perhaps believe in his presence in the Eucharist, but do not allow Jesus to be truly present in their lives and in what they do in life. When there is a disconnection between our reception of the Eucharist and what we say or do for the remaining of the day, there is crisis. Some others might very well receive the Holy Communion, but suddenly build barriers that prevent them from being transformed by what they receive.

Anytime we do so and that the Eucharist does not have any impact on us, we are not different from those who were listening to Jesus, but refused to trust him and his word that he was the bread of life. The result in the end is very simple: we make Jesus a prisoner of the tabernacle, that is, we receive him here; we adore him here, but at the same time, we leave him here like a jewel that is locked in a safe.

Can this crisis be resolved? Yes, of course. How? Well, by continually renewing our faith in Jesus anytime we celebrate the Holy Mass. That is why Jesus can never be approached from the outside, but always from within, in faith. 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”. That is the circle of spiritual life, namely that the Spirit is received when we open our hearts to the message of Jesus; the Spirit, in turn, leads us to Jesus and to the deepening of his message.

The second thing I want to stress is about the importance of mother Church. Let me formulate this thought around the words of Peter: “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God”. The context of these words is very important. In fact, these words come at the very critical moment of crisis, when everybody was leaving Jesus. At that time, Peter felt that it made no sense to leave Jesus, because of the truth he has found.

That context is like that of today in which we live and where the Church is decried and reviled because of sex abuse and many other things. Some people just say to us, “why do not you leave the Church”? We do stay in the Church, not because it is perfect, or because it has all the answers to our questions, but because we find in it the truth of Jesus which is in its essence more than the human faults and limitations.

But at the same time, to remain in the Church becomes a challenge we have to face on a daily basis by living according to the values of the kingdom. That is why it would be a mistake to take our belonging to the Church as something granted. We have to renew it continually at the example of the Jews that Joshua invited to renew their covenant with God. Let us, then, pray that God may help us to trust him and renew our commitment with him. May God bless you all!

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



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