

Faithfulness to the Covenant: 21st Sunday – Year B

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John: (Jn. 6: 60-69)

After hearing his doctrine, many of the followers of Jesus said, "This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?"

Jesus was aware that his followers were complaining about it and said, "Does this upset you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe."

For Jesus knew from the outset those who did not believe and who it was that would betray him. '

He went on: "This is why I told you that no one could come to me unless the Father allows him."

After this, many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him. Then Jesus said to the Twelve "What would you, do you want to go away too?"

Simon Peter answered, "Lord, who shall we go to? you have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God."

This is the Gospel of the Lord

For the fifth Sunday in succession, (except last Sunday when we celebrated the solemnity of Assumption) we are taking the Gospel passage from Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. Today's passage concludes the chapter. Throughout these weeks, the Church has stressed a most important point in our Christian life:

- Material food is God's gift, but a far greater gift is the spiritual food that God provides for us, which is no other than Christ himself.
- We either make Christ our spiritual nourishment or go hungry and die. He becomes our food through our faith in him, through God's Word and in the Eucharist.

- In today's Gospel we see the reaction of various people to the incredible offer Jesus made of giving us his own body and blood as food in the Holy Eucharist. Like them, we too are left free to accept or to reject his gift but the consequences of our choice will be ours.

- Partaking of the Eucharist is a serious affair; it amounts to ratifying each time the covenant we signed with Christ at our own Baptism. This is the lesson the Church wants us to learn through this Sunday's first reading, which narrates the ratification of the Sinai covenant between God and the people of Israel, once established in the Promised Land.

- In today's second reading, Paul completes the lesson: a Christian is a person committed to love, to individual and family love on which the new covenant is based.

Let us examine the readings and engrave deeply in our heart the lessons they convey.

[1. On reaching the Promised Land, Joshua invited the people of Israel to ratify the covenant they had signed with God on Mount Sinai:]

We read in the Book of Deuteronomy that Moses died without entering the Promised Land. Before dying, Yahweh instructed him to choose Joshua as his successor and Moses did so (Deut. 31: 1-8)

Under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites conquered most of the land God had promised Abraham he would give to his descendants. The conquest did not proceed as fast as they would have expected because of the Israelites' repeated unfaithfulness to Yahweh.

- Once settled in the land, Joshua summoned all the leaders of the tribes and the whole people to a meeting at a place called Shechem, in the centre of their territory. Shechem had been a holy place for the Israelites since ancient times:

- It was at Shechem that God had appeared to Abraham, newly arrived from his own country out of which God had called him. There Yahweh promised Abraham that one day, that land on which he now stood would belong to his descendants (Gen. 12: 7)
- Nearly seven hundred years had passed since the promise had been made; Joshua wanted his people to realise that Yahweh had been true to his word; the land was now theirs.
- And it was at Shechem too that Jacob bought a piece of land from the local people, on his way back home together with his family, after having served Laban, his father-in-law, for several years. On that plot of land, he erected an altar to Yahweh, and ordered Rachel and all his family to bury there the idols they had brought with them. As from that moment, they should consider Yahweh, and only Yahweh, as their God (Gen. 33: 18-20).
- It was precisely in that plot of land that the bones of Joseph, brought from Egypt were buried in accordance with his will. (Gen. 50: 24; Jos. 24: 32)

- This was the very place chosen by Joshua for the great meeting of the whole people of Israel. **His intention in calling them was to commit them once again to faithfulness to Yahweh**, by renewing the alliance he had established with them at Sinai.

- Joshua started by recalling to the people all that Yahweh had done for them and for their forefathers: the many wonders he had wrought to get them out of Egypt, his love and forbearance during the long years across the desert and how he had led them to occupy the land which now was theirs.

- After making them realise Yahweh's love and faithfulness, Joshua challenged his people; let them, of their own free will, choose the God they wanted to serve:

- They must now choose to worship either the idols worshipped by Abraham's family before Abraham had been called by God, similar to those brought by Rachel from her father's house, and buried by Jacob in that very place,
- or the idols which the peoples of Canaan had worshipped before being displaced by the Israelites,

- or Yahweh.

- Joshua hastened to set the example: "**Whatever your choice be, I and my family will serve no god but Yahweh!**" (Jos. 24: 15)

Following the example of Joshua, the whole people of Israel shouted: "We too will serve Yahweh, for he is our God" (Jos. 24: 18). As a remembrance of their choice, Joshua raised a memorial stone, to remain there as a witness to their promise.

This is the message which the first reading of this Sunday conveys: the people of Israel were given to choose between Yahweh and idols; fortunately for them, they chose Yahweh. In so doing, they had ratified the covenant God had established with them at Sinai.

[2. Each time we share in the Eucharist, we are invited to renew the covenant God established with us at Baptism:]

- At Baptism, each one of us, of his own free will, buried his or her idols: selfishness, pride, greed, love of pleasure, and so on, and decidedly chose Christ. If we received Baptism as children, we, on becoming adults, accepted the commitment made in our name by our God-parents at our Baptism.

- Ours was an individual personal choice: God established his covenant with each one individually, and in essence, its terms coincided with those of the old covenant: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26: 12)

That is, Christ offered us his love, his help, his protection and above all his own life, the Life in the Spirit, and we promised to be his own, that is, to observe God's commandments which he had summed up into a single one, the commandment of love. (Jn. 13: 34)

- But unfortunately, no matter how determined our choice was, the idols we buried at our Baptism reappeared time and again, enticing us to worship them. We must keep on renewing our covenant day after day, ever more decidedly, daily committing ourselves to Christ.

Jesus urges us to renew it at each celebration of the Eucharist; he wants us to do it both as individuals and as a community.

In other words, each time we receive the Eucharist Jesus urges us to be faithful to our part of the agreement, that is, to commit ourselves to love. In this Jesus is adamant: **to exclude even a single person from our love, renders us unfit to receive the Eucharist.**

- Like the Jews at the time of Joshua, **we too must choose between Christ and idols, between love and selfishness.** Fortunate shall we be if we make the right choice.

- In today's second reading, Paul writes beautifully to his Christians of Ephesus about married love, the love that husband and wife ought to have for one another: it must be a copy of the love that Christ has for his Church and the Church has for Christ. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave

himself up for her,... Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.” (Eph 5:25,28).

This applies to all genuine love. Either our love is truly Christian, Christ's love-like, or it is nothing. As long as we live in this world, the Eucharist is meant to be the source of that love.

[3. We must renew our covenant with Christ at each Sunday Service:]

When we celebrate the Eucharist, Christ wants us to renew our covenant with. He wants us to renew our resolution to live in love and unity.

- At each Sunday Service, Jesus compels us, so to say, to take sides, just as he did with his listeners at Capernaum.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus' listeners reacting in different ways to his promise of the Eucharist:

- His enemies, the Jewish religious leaders, rejected his gift from the start and led others to do the same.
- A large group of people who had followed him so far "stopped going with him" (In. 6, 66); their faith in him was still superficial
- The apostles too wavered, and Jesus challenged them: "What about you? Do you want to go away too?" (v. 67)

- Fortunately the Spirit led the apostles to make the right choice: "Master to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life." (v. 68)

- There is a person in today's Gospel who does not belong to any of the groups mentioned above: **Judas!**

- Exteriorly, he still walked with the Master and with the other apostles; spiritually, however, he was miles away from him and from them. Deep in his heart he not only rejected Jesus' offer of the Eucharist; he scorned it... !

- John closes chapter 6 of his Gospel with a terrible sentence spoken by Jesus: **"Have I not chosen you, twelve of you? Yet one of you is a devil" (v. 70).** John leaves us in no doubt as to whom Jesus was referring: "He meant Judas ... who was going to betray him!" (v. 71)

- Let us not follow his example. Sunday after Sunday we must make the right choice and repeat with Peter:

"Master to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life" (v. 68)

- We should repeat these words whenever in danger of abandoning Jesus in time of temptation: "What am I about to do? Away from Jesus, where shall I go? Has Jesus ever disappointed me?"

- Our past experience should be our guide. It is the experience of millions of people who at a time or another in life, abandoned Jesus through sin.

The devil had promised them and us unlimited happiness, but what was the result? Since Jesus is life, light, joy and love, once away from him, all we met

was death, darkness, sadness and hatred. Only on going back to him through repentance did we recover what we had lost by sin.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, help us to be faithful to our covenant with you; help us to keep the commandment of love your Son gave us. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen