



Twenty first Sunday Ordinary Time 2006

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

To get the full flavour of the first reading read the whole piece 1-28.

The book of Joshua derives from a collection of tribal traditions concerning the conquest of the land of Canaan. Today's reading is probably about the origins of a tribal confederacy.

Joshua, as successor of Moses, was responsible for the entry into the promised land. His military task now over, he set about providing a charter for the people's new life as settlers. The elders and leaders were summoned to stand in an orderly fashion, not before Joshua, but before God.

Joshua reminded the people of their polytheistic beginnings. Their gods had been tribal gods; they were now called to move on. As befitted the occasion a history of God's great deeds was recounted. Joshua then emphasised that the land is a gift from God.

With the position spelled out Joshua gets to the point- some choices have got to be made. They are told that they will have to decide between their old tribal gods or the God of freedom. The people promised their fidelity by re-iterating the deeds of God. Joshua wisely reminded them that it was easier said than done. They are reminded to think before they commit because God will make demands of them.

The people promise fidelity and are told to begin to live faithfully. A covenant is made and Joshua raises a stone marker as witness.

The stone represents the land, which is witness to the promises. The stone will endure and be a physical and constant reminder of their pledges.

At first glance it may not be clear how this reading connects with the gospel. The opening line re-echoes the difficulty the people were having with the concept of Jesus as food. Jesus asks, "Does this shake your faith?" As Joshua warned his people that to serve God would require effort, so Jesus knows that he needs to respond to the murmurs of protest that he was picking up.

How do you respond to people who insist on taking everything literally? John has already addressed the problem once in the story of Nicodemus. That worthy's response to re-birth was quite primitive. "Am I expected to re-enter the womb?"

John makes the point that it was the followers who were having difficulty with understanding the concept of Eucharist. He emphasises the point later when he says that some disciples left the group at that time.

In the Gospel of Mark a testing time occurs around the acceptance of Jesus' suffering and death; in John the sticking point is Eucharist.

With some of the outer circle leaving, Jesus challenges the core. "What about you? Peter answers for the group, "Who would we go to?" There is the acknowledgement that difficulty with the message does not indicate a loss of faith in the messenger. Understanding may follow if the disciples stay wrestling with the teaching.

The recognition that some aspects of the teachings and traditions of the New Testament might need some hard work, is illustrated by the passage from Ephesians.

We have to read between the lines as well as the text. Rather than dismissing the text as having no relevance, we have to ask, "What is the heart of the message?"

In the passage it is quite straightforward, right relations between couples in marriage. We have to explore what constitutes "right relationships" today. The first two readings make explicit that all relationships are to have God at the centre.

So the Christian community has to discern what in our times constitutes a Godly marriage. In discerning this, a community will also have to examine the way they understand and live the communitarian call of Trinity.

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