

SYNOPSIS: OT XXI [B] (AUG 23) SUNDAY ON JOHN 6: 60-69 (L-15)

Introduction: The main theme of today's readings is that Christian life is a series of daily choices for God or against God, as we choose to live out or reject the truths He has revealed through His prophets in the Old Testament and especially through His Son Jesus in the New Testament. The fundamental choice we make determines how we live our lives, deciding whom we will serve.

Scripture lessons: In the first reading, Joshua challenges the Israelites to decide whom they will serve, the gods of the Amorites in whose country they were then dwelling or the God of Israelites Who has done so much for them. The Renewal of Covenant ceremony in Joshua chapter 24 reminds us that the Eucharist is a Covenant meal that calls for a decision of Faith. The second reading emphasizes the unity that must exist in the Body of Christ and the intimate relationship between Jesus and His followers. It also challenges the Ephesian Christians to make the right choice in life and build Christian marriages on mutual respect and love, accepting each spouse's rights and dignity. He also uses the husband-wife relationship as an analogy to explain the close relationship between Christ and the Church. Paul reminds us that Jesus nourishes us, the members of his Church, through the Eucharist, making us his own flesh and blood, as husband and wife become one flesh. Concluding his long Eucharistic discourse, Jesus, in today's Gospel, challenges his Jewish audience to make their choice of accepting him as the true Bread from Heaven who gives his Body and Blood as their Heavenly Food or of joining those who have lost their Faith in him and left him, expressing their confusion and doubts about his claims. Today's passage describes the various reactions of the people to Jesus' claims. Jesus gives his twelve apostles the option of leaving him or staying with him. The apostles exercise their freedom of choice by choosing to stay with Jesus. In this Eucharistic celebration, we, too, are called to make a decision, profess our Faith in God's Son and

renew the Covenant ratified in his life, death and Resurrection.

Life messages: # 1: Let us make our choice for Christ and live it: We Christians have accepted the challenge of following the way of Christ and making choices for Christ, fortified by the Bread he gives and relying on the power of his Holy Spirit. The Heavenly Bread and the Holy Spirit will give us the courage of our Christian convictions to take a stand for Jesus, to accept the Church's teachings and to face ridicule, criticisms and even social isolation for our adherence to sound Christian principles in our lives. That is what we mean by our "Amen" while receiving Jesus in Holy Communion. We express without any conditions or reservations our total commitment to him in the community to which we belong. Christ's thoughts and attitudes, his values, his life-view must become totally ours. Above all, we are to identify with him in the offering of his Flesh and the pouring out of his Blood on the cross by spending our lives for others.

OT XXI [B] (Aug 23): Jos 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Eph 5:21-32; Jn 6: 60-69

Anecdote # 1: Martyrs' choice for God, for Christ and his teachings: The Old Testament, the New Testament and the history of the Church tell the stories of brave men and women who heroically exercised their freedom of choice for God and His Commandments and courted martyrdom. II Maccabees 6: 18-31 describes how the 90-year-old saintly scribe, Eleazar, welcomed martyrdom rather than eat the flesh of pork. The same book describes another heroic Jewish mother and seven of her brave children

who lost their lives by resisting the order of the Greek commander to reject their Jewish Faith. The martyrdom of St. Stephen is described in the Acts of the Apostles. The first three centuries saw thousands of Christians heroically choosing Christ and courting the cruel death inflicted by the pagan Roman Empire. St. Thomas More was the second-in-power in England and St. John Fisher the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. Both were executed by King Henry VIII for choosing the teaching of the Church on marriage and divorce instead of choosing their king's view. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor, chose to resist the anti-Christian and non-ethical doctrines of Hitler and was executed at 39. Today's readings challenge us to make a choice for God and His teachings or against God.

#2: Do we stand for God? A group of Christians gathered for a secret prayer meeting in Russia, at the height of the persecution of all Christian churches. Suddenly the door was broken by the boot of a soldier. He entered the room and faced the people with a gun in his hand. They all feared the worst. He spoke. "If there's anyone who doesn't really believe in Jesus, then, get out now while you have a chance." There was a rush to the door. A small group remained - those who had committed themselves to Jesus, and who were never prepared to run from him. The soldier closed the door after the others, and once again, he stood in front of those who remained, gun poised. Finally, a smile appeared on his face, as he turned to leave the room, and he whispered "Actually, I believe in Jesus, too, and you're much better off without those others!" [Jack McArdle in *And That's the Gospel Truth: Reflections on the Sunday Gospels Year B* (December, 1999).]

3: "I'm Jesus! Don't you choose me?" There is the story that during the Second World War certain Nazis shot down a group of Jews and buried them in a mass grave. A wounded twelve-year-old boy was still alive. He dug his way out of the shallow dirt and went around the neighborhood

seeking shelter in homes. The people knew what had happened and, when they saw the boy caked with dirt, they hurriedly shut the door in his face. One woman was about to do the same when the boy said: "Mom, don't you recognize me? I'm the Jesus you Christians say you love." The lady broke into tears and received the boy into her home. She had made her choice for Jesus. In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges his audience to believe him and to accept his promise of the Eucharistic food.

Introduction: The main theme of today's readings is that Christian life is a series of daily choices for God or against God, as we choose to live out or reject the truths He has revealed through His prophets in the Old Testament and especially through His Son Jesus in the New Testament. They remind us that the fundamental choice we make determines how we live our lives. Joshua, in our first reading, and Paul, in the second reading, make similar challenges to the people to make their choice. Today we, too, are challenged to decide whom we will serve. In the first reading Joshua challenges the Israelites to decide whom they will serve, the gods of their fathers, the gods of the Amorites in whose country they were then dwelling or the God of Israelites Who has done so much for them. The Renewal of Covenant ceremony in Joshua 24 reminds us that the Eucharist is a Covenant meal that calls for a decision of Faith. The Response for today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps 34), encourages perseverance to the end, when we shall eventually "taste" (fully realize through personal experience), and "see" (everything, past, present and future, falling into place), "the goodness of the Lord!" Paul, in the second reading, emphasizes the unity that must exist in the Body of Christ and the intimate relationship between Jesus and His followers. It also challenges the Ephesian Christians to build Christian marriages on mutual respect and love. Paul says that the Christian husband and wife should stand together in love before God, respecting each other's rights and dignity. He also uses the husband-wife relationship as an analogy to explain the close relationship between Christ and the Church. That is why he urges his faithful community in Ephesus, "Live in love, as Christ loved us." He wants them to make the right choice in life. Paul reminds us that Jesus

nourishes us, the members of his Church, through the Eucharist, making us his own Flesh and Blood, as husband and wife become one flesh. Concluding his long Eucharistic discourse in today's Gospel, Jesus challenges his Jewish audience to make their choice of accepting the New Covenant he offers in his Body and Blood or of joining those who have lost their Faith in him and left him, expressing their confusion and doubts about his claims. Today's passage describes the various reactions of the people to Jesus' claims. As Joshua spoke to his followers, Jesus speaks to the twelve apostles and gives them the option of leaving him or staying with him. The disciples cannot reject Jesus after all that he has done for them. Peter, their spokesman, asks Jesus how they can turn to anyone else – he is the only one who has the message of eternal life. The apostles exercise their freedom of choice by choosing to stay with Jesus. In the Eucharistic celebration, we, like Peter, are called to make a decision, profess our Faith in God's Son and renew the Covenant ratified in his life, death and Resurrection.

First reading, Joshua 24:1-2, 15-17, 18: In our first reading, taken from the book of Joshua, the leader who succeeded Moses, Joshua challenges the Israelites who have entered the Promised Land to make a choice. He challenges the people to reaffirm their Covenant relationship with Yahweh. By that time (12th century B.C.), the Promised Land had been divided up among the tribes of Israel. But a big concern was whether the tribes would drift away from the worship of the God of Israel. So before departing from them in death, Joshua gathered the tribal leaders around him to issue his last words of advice. They gathered at Shechem, 40 miles north of Jerusalem, where God had first appeared to Abraham and promised to make his descendants a great nation (Genesis 12:6ff and 33:18ff). It was a fitting place for the renewal of the Covenant. Joshua reminded the people of what God had done for them in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, providing for their survival in the desert and giving them victory over their enemies. God had been their Deliverer, Provider and Protector. This is the God that Joshua called Lord and with Whom he wanted to be covenanted. Joshua's challenge to the Israelites is to decide,

then and there, whom they will serve, the gods of their fathers, the gods of the Amorites among whom they now live, or this God Who has done so much for them. They have to decide for the God of Israel or to reject Him in favor of the idols of their fathers and neighbors. Their decision for God should be reflected in their fidelity to the terms of the Covenant, i.e. the Law. Then Joshua sets the example for the rest of Israelites: "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Joshua's challenge prefigures the choice the apostles must make in today's Gospel. We, too, are asked today whether or not we choose to remain in discipleship to Jesus.

Second Reading, Ephesians 5:21-32: In this second reading, Paul, writing to the Ephesians, gives us the criteria for our daily moral choices in the family, parish community and civil society. He wants the Ephesians to use in all spheres of Christian life the criteria for the relationship of a successful marriage. The husband is to use the authority that society gives him over his family, not to dominate and seek his own selfish satisfaction but rather to aid in the salvation and spiritual development of his family and household. Paul uses the image of a marriage relationship primarily to express the bond that exists between Christ and the Church. In addition, he uses the image of marriage to describe the relationship that should exist among believers. Those who enter into the Covenant of marriage should love and submit to one another in mutual care and respect, just as Christ submitted himself in loving sacrifice for the Church. Paul wants the Ephesians to accept, love, mutually respect, serve and recognize the true dignity of each member of Christ as the norms for all their relationships, both in the family and in their Faith community. Paul also reminds them, and reminds us, that Jesus nourishes the members of his Church through the Eucharist, making them his own flesh and blood, as husband and wife become one flesh. So the norms of our every relationship must be acceptance, love, mutual respect, service and recognition of the true dignity of each member of Christ. Our choices in family life and parish life should be guided by this high ideal.

Exegesis: A tough teaching without compromise: "This teaching is

difficult. Who can accept it?" It was Jesus' disciples who made this complaint. They were offended by Jesus' language -- his imagery -- the metaphors he used in his Eucharistic discourse. It was Jesus' dramatic way of saying that we must accept him totally, without any conditions or reservations. His thoughts and attitudes, his values, his life-view must become totally ours. Above all we are to identify with him in the offering of his Flesh and the pouring out of his Blood on the cross, the symbol of God's unutterable love for us. But without giving any further explanation, Jesus simply challenged them to open themselves to the gift of Faith that God was offering them: "No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father" (v. 65). Jesus tries to help his remaining followers to make a leap of Faith, because it is only with Faith that they will be able to see and grasp the triple mystery which has been revealed to them, namely, (1) the Incarnation (I am the Bread that came down from Heaven, 6:41); (2) the redemption (the Bread that I give is my Flesh for the life of the world, 6:51); (3) the Ascension and glorification (the Son of Man will ascend to where he was before, 6:62). Having insisted earlier that the believer must eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of the Son of Man in order to have eternal life, Jesus now tells his disciples "that the flesh is of no avail." But "flesh" here is not the Eucharist. Rather, "flesh" means natural sustenance, which cannot give spiritual nourishment. And the "Spirit" here means the life-giving Holy Spirit Who will be given to believers after Jesus' ascent into heaven. Peter's response, "Master, to whom we shall go? You have the words of eternal life," reflects the faith-filled, free and whole-hearted decision of the early Christian community to follow Jesus and his teaching. While giving Holy Communion, the priest says, "The Body of Christ" and we respond with a total, "Amen" or "Yes!" That "Yes!" is not just an act of Faith in the Real Presence but a total commitment of myself to Jesus in the community of which I am a member. Some Bible scholars consider Jesus' question, "Do you want to leave me, too?" to Peter and the apostle's response as parallel to Jesus' question, "Who do you think I am?" and Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-30; Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-21).

We are reminded of Paul, who spoke of "the offense (scandal) of the cross" (Gal. 5:11), and who said "The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). The complaints of the disciples (v. 61), linked them to the Israelites who followed Moses into the wilderness. Those early Israelites were unhappy because their journey was hard. Faithful discipleship is seldom easy. Why is the Gospel offensive and scandalous? It is because God's ways are not our ways. It is offensive because it is costly. When Christ calls us to eat his Flesh and to drink his Blood, he is inviting us to participate in his death. The Christians who first heard this Gospel experienced persecution. They knew martyred Christians, and they knew Christians who had avoided martyrdom by compromising their Faith. The Gospel with no offense would be like a surgeon with no scalpel -- having no power to heal. Christ and his cross, truly revealed, will always be an offense, except to the redeemed. The Church must always be ready to give offense -- to speak out for Christ and against the destructive beliefs and behaviors that the world finds so attractive. The total assimilation of Jesus' spirit and outlook into our lives is very challenging. And it was a challenge that some of Jesus' disciples were not prepared to face. And the reason? "There are among you some who do not believe, do not trust me." Faith is not simply a set of ideas to be held on to. It is a living relationship with a Person and his vision of life. It is a relationship that needs to grow and be deepened with the years. It is a relationship that has constantly to be re-appraised in a constantly changing world. We must hear Peter's words to Jesus resounding through the centuries: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Life Messages: # 1: Let us make our choice for Christ and live it: We Christians have accepted the challenge of following the way of Christ and making choices for Christ, fortified by the Bread he gives and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. The Heavenly Bread and the Holy Spirit will give us the courage of our Christian convictions to accept the Church's teachings and to face ridicule, criticisms and even social isolation for our adherence to sound Christian principles in our lives. 2) The very option or

possibility of choosing for or against Jesus is repeated over and over again in the modern age. We should resolve to take a stand for Jesus and accept the consequences. We recognize, in our going to Communion, the accepting of that challenge to be totally one with Jesus. When the priest gives us Holy Communion saying, "The Body of Christ," we respond, "Amen." That "Amen," that "Yes," is not just an act of faith in the Real Presence; it is a total commitment of ourselves to Jesus in the community of which we are members. We must accept him totally, without any conditions or reservations. Christ's thoughts and attitudes, his values, his life-view must become totally ours, and must govern and shape our lives. Above all, we are to identify with him in the offering of his Flesh and the pouring out of his Blood on the cross, the symbol of God's unutterable love for us.

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