

21st Sunday of Year--Cycle B
(Josh 24:1-2,15-17,18; Eph 5:2a,25-32; John 6:60-69)

It's not often that a celebrant has a choice for the second reading as I do today. Both offerings are from chapter 5 of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, but the one begins with v. 25, the other begins several verses earlier and contains that unpopular verse, "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands." The choice is a no-brainer unless I should want to be stoned on my way out. The fact that we now have a choice is a testimonial to how much woman's cause has advanced since the earlier days.

Our three readings seem to go off in different directions, first with Joshua speaking to Israel about a covenant, then St. Paul speaking about marriage, and finally, Jesus' followers arguing about whether to accept His teaching on the Bread from Heaven. However, all three readings do relate to one theme, i.e., commitment.

Joshua's covenant ceremony is not on Mt. Sinai but at Shechem, in the central highlands of Israel. The Chosen People have now conquered all the territory God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But on the way they have acquired any number of fellow travelers. Even when they left Egypt, we are told, "A crowd of mixed ancestry went up with them, with livestock in great abundance." In the course of the invasion, the Israelites made peace with the Gibeonites, a people of Canaan, entering into an agreement with them. In all probability this happened with many other groups. In the "idealized" account of the invasion, the Israelites slaughtered all the Canaanites in sight. However, there are, happily, strong reasons to believe that, in fact, they converted many more than they killed. So now we have what appears to be a renewal of the Sinai covenant, though in truth it was the moment at which many new elements, previously pagan, are incorporated into Israel. So Joshua has to challenge them to choose between "the gods your ancestors served beyond the river," or "the gods of the Amorites," i.e., the native Canaanite gods, or the God of Israel. In the full text from

Joshua, as opposed to the bowdlerized version in the lectionary, Joshua speaks very sternly: "You may not be able to serve the Lord, he is a holy God; he is a passionate God who will not forgive your transgressions or your sins." But they respond, "We will serve the Lord, our God, and will listen to his voice." So we have commitment.

Paul's words about the relationship between husband and wife, in the second reading, are also concerned with commitment. Skipping over the sticky part about submission, his words are truly beautiful. As you know, they are used in the wedding ceremony. He uses the word "love" five times, three times with reference of the husband for the wife. This love is raised to the highest level, by the comparison, "as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her." We can see a connection to the first reading because covenant is the best analogy for marriage. A covenant is not a contract, but the inauguration of a new relationship, a relationship similar to blood kinship; it involves a sharing of shalom and blessing. In such a relationship there should be only one will--or rather, two wills acting as one. It involves commitment. Young people often mistake infatuation for love, but the two are worlds apart. Love abides; infatuation fades as soon as a new attraction comes along. Why do so many marriages end in divorce? No doubt there are many reasons, but one can be rushing into it, without thought or planning. I know a couple, childhood sweethearts, who determined not to marry until both had obtained graduate degrees. One can feel confident that that marriage will last. For one thing, finances, which vex so many marriages, are unlikely to be a problem. It is unlikely they will suddenly face unforeseen decisions, such as whether the wife should work, whether they should have children early or later, whether they should save or try to buy a home, decisions on which marriages sometimes founder. Again, it is a question of commitment.

The gospel, again, is a different matter. For several Sundays we've been reading from the Bread of Life discourse in chapter 6 of St. John's gospel. It started some weeks ago with the multiplication of the loaves, went on to relate this to the manna in the wilderness, proceeded to

identify Jesus as the Bread come down from Heaven, and last Sunday became very concrete when Jesus identified His Body as Bread to be eaten, His Blood to be drunk. In that reading, He declared, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you." Many of those present had difficulty accepting these words, and we can easily understand this. We, after years of celebrating Mass and receiving the Eucharist, have no difficulties in understanding what Jesus is saying (aside from the mystery involved). But a Jew contemporary with Jesus? We expect it would be a different case. We know that John's gospel was written after a whole generation of Christian experience. We know that this gospel is the fruit of John's long meditation on the events of Jesus' life, seen in the light of the Christian experience. The easy way out of the question is to understand the author as expressing the developed Christian faith and retrojecting it into the career of Jesus. I call this "the easy way out"-which I would gladly take. But against it stands the earliest Christian tradition, the synoptic gospels and, even earlier, St. Paul in 1 Corinthians, which all present Jesus' words of institution, "take and eat, for this is my body, take and drink for this is my blood." And this passage from today's gospel describes an event in which such words formed a watershed between those willing to believe and the others who weren't. Those willing to believe had seen His miracles, but more importantly, had seen something in Him that made them know that anything He said was true. This is expressed in Peter's response to Jesus' question, "Will you also go away?" "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." That is commitment! Although the covenant requires commitment, as does marriage, no commitment binds us so closely as our commitment to Jesus.

No homilist could ever do justice to the Eucharist. It demonstrates God's love for us in so many ways. That Jesus left the sacrifice of the Mass for our daily worship, the Eucharist for us as a memorial, shows a desire to be near us so great that it is almost impossible to understand and

believe. We think we transform the Host into our body, but in fact it is the other way around: He comes to us to transform us into Himself. Even outside the action of the Mass, He leaves us the Blessed Sacrament so He can be near us.

We said that covenant introduces a relationship similar to blood kinship; nowhere is this more true than in the Eucharist. We speak of covenant as a sharing of shalom and blessing, that it implies one will. To make this actual, we need to be certain that our will is one with His. We speak of commitment, but none is greater than His. To show our gratitude for all He has done for us, we should strive to make our love, our commitment to Him equal to His.