

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Joshua 24:1-2.15-18 / John 6:60-69)
22.08.2021

In this morning's first reading we meet the people of Israel at the end of what has been a long period of desert wandering. They have passed forty years in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. Where we meet them today God's people stand at the threshold of the Land of Promise; they can see the border entry into Canaan. They are being invited to make that crossing, to enter into the land of abundant blessing promised to them. In order that they may live there in peace and harmony, in communion with God and with each other, a commitment is asked of them. They must choose to receive God's gift being offered to them. What I see being underlined here is something which I believe is vital for us to understand. It is that God never imposes anything upon any of us – not even His choicest gifts. We have to freely accept the gift on offer. We have to consent to receive what is proposed to us. We have to willingly welcome what the Lord wants to bestow upon us. Just as the Israelites had to use their freedom wisely – choosing to serve the Lord in the Land of Promise – so too we have to engage our liberty by making the choice to serve the Lord wherever He calls us to do so. The lesson to be retained is a simple one. It is that the Lord will surely work in and through our lives, but only to the extent that we allow Him to do so.

At the end of today's Gospel passage we see Jesus leaving the Twelve free to choose either to stay with Him, pursuing the road He indicates to them, or to turn back and follow their own way in life. Either they will follow the path whereby Jesus leads them or else they will follow a path of their own choosing. Peter's word to Jesus in reply reveals who and what really matters to him: *Lord, who shall we go to?* It isn't that Peter has been cured of his initial hesitancy in Jesus' regard, or of all his many fears (these will surface again subsequently). It isn't that Peter will never deviate from the right path from this moment in time onwards – the unfolding of the story will show up Peter's weaknesses, his struggles and difficulties to remain properly situated in a stance of firm commitment to his Lord. The Gospels will go on to draw attention to Peter's denials of Jesus. They will record for us the story of the Apostle's falls, but, nonetheless, today's Gospel passage is an all important one. It helps us to grasp what Peter wanted to do: in his heart of hearts (weak though he was) Peter really did want to follow the Lord; he wished to do so without failing – even though he would fall down on this score. In today's Gospel passage it is drawn to our attention that Peter wanted to be with Jesus. Peter was being true to himself and to Jesus when he declared that he could see nowhere else to go. Peter could not see anyone better to follow than Christ. It is this conviction that leads Peter to confess that he sees Jesus to be the source of all true life; the source of his own true life. In his innermost being Peter knows that authentic life is to be found in Christ-Jesus. He confesses Jesus Christ to be his life. (Saying that, I hear resounding in the ear of my heart the World Youth Day Gatherings song: *Jesus Christ You are my life.*) Peter makes this declaration not only here in this morning's Gospel passage, but in other places as well. Peter can say to Jesus: *You are the Christ... You are the One in whom I place my confidence and my trust.* This morning Peter speaks up and says in the hearing of those looking on: *To whom shall we go? You have the message of life.* The same confession of faith in regard to Jesus is asked of us.

Like the people of Israel of old – those standing at the border of the Land of Canaan – just about to make their crossing into the Land of Promise, invited to enter into and traverse the waters of the River Jordan; like Peter and the other apostles left with the choice to stay with and follow Christ or to turn away from Jesus and follow their own or someone else's path, we

are asked this morning to make a choice to follow the Lord's bidding. We are asked either to engage our lives in the Lord's service or to walk away from Him and do our own thing. The Lord totally respects our liberty. He won't coerce us into anything. He leaves us free to say *yes* or to say *no*.

Reading together both Scripture passages proposed for our meditation this morning I cannot help but think of a third Scripture passage... and even a fourth. I could just as easily evoke other passages as well, but let the first two that come to my mind in the immediate suffice to make my point.

I find myself recalling that famous passage in the Book of Deuteronomy 30 in which the People of God are summoned and asked to choose between life and death. (Deuteronomy 30 is prepared already in Deuteronomy 6 when the People of Israel are given the gift of the Lord and invited to choose to follow it.) I think also (and above all) of the story of the rich young man which is recorded for us in all three Synoptic Gospels (in Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18). I think of that young man whom we are told *Jesus looked at intently and loved from the heart*, bidding him to follow Him in the path of life being proposed to him. Albeit that Jesus clearly wanted the young man to consent to His call, He left the young man free to respond to His bidding or to pursue his own past ways and/or his present trajectory by clinging to his riches.

This morning all of us who are gathered here are being invited, as it were, to stand with the people of Israel listening to Joshua's exhortation. We are being asked to pay heed to Joshua's words which relay to us the Lord's call to enter into the place of more abundant life to which the Lord beckons, for Joshua speaks not on his own behalf but on God's behalf. Joshua declares to us that everything of lasting value that we are and anything of value that we have has been given to us. Everything we hold in hand is the result of the Lord's blessing upon us. Anything good we experience in life is God's gift to us. We are meant to live the gift of God that we have received as a gift we make to the Lord in our turn. The prophet reminds us: *Freely we have received so that freely we may give.*

In light of all that I am saying here today, the call I hear addressed to us is to decide to engage our lives in the Lord's service, daring to take the steps we need to take to do so.

The step the Lord asks of us is clearly a very personal one. Each one of us must decide what it is that he or she is called (and wants) to give to the Lord. Each one of us is called to pronounce his or her personal *yes* to the Lord's will for his or her life. At the same time it has to be remembered that our personal engagements in the Lord's regard are never taken in isolation, but always in communion. Our personal *yes* to the Lord engages us with others in the community of faith. It is as a people that Israel entered into the Land of Canaan. It is as members of the People of God that each one of the Israelites crossed the Jordan River to share life together in the Land that was given to them as a People. The communitarian dimension of our relationship with God is fundamental. I repeat myself. Our personal relationship with the Lord is to be lived in communion with others. Let's apply that to where we are today. When Jesus feeds us with the Bread of Life which is given to us in the Eucharist, He nourishes us together as a part of a community of believers. It was to the Twelve together that Jesus addressed the question: *What about you, do you want to go away too?* (That was a *you plural*.) When Simon Peter spoke up and answered Jesus' question, he did so in the name of the Twelve. He said: *Lord, who shall we go to? We believe... We know that You are the Christ.*

I hear the word of God addressed to us this morning as a word of invitation. The invitation put to us is one we have to decide either to accept or to reject. While it is evident that the Lord wants to see us enjoy life in freedom in the Land of Promise and while He wants to give Himself to us in the Eucharist – and in so many other places and ways, it befalls us to choose either to welcome or dismiss the gifts on offer. May the strength we need to say yes to the Lord's gift of Himself be accorded to each and every one of us. Let us dare to say each one, in a very personal way: *Yes, Lord, I believe in You. Credo!* At the same time, as a member of the community of believers, with Peter, let us proclaim our faith together, saying: *Lord we believe... We know You are the Holy One of God, the Christ.*

Ending this reflection on the note of faith and the importance of making a confession of faith as individuals and as members of God's People, I find myself recalling St Paul VI's famous *Credo of the People of God* – promulgated on June 30th, 1968. From that *Credo* I retain these words in regard to the proclamation of faith in the Eucharist made therein: *In the Sacred Species of bread and wine, in order to give Himself, the Lord has willed to offer Himself to us as food and to associate us with the unity of His Mystical Body. We believe in this! As we welcome the gift of the Lord's Body in Holy Communion we become His Church.*

After five consecutive Sundays given to a reading of the *Bread of Life Discourse* from John's Gospel – a discourse which culminates in the scene of the Confession of Faith made on behalf of the Twelve by Simon Peter, let us pray that we may make such a confession of faith our own. Let us pray that we may enter ever more deeply into the mystery we celebrate, each time we gather around the Lord's Holy Table. May all of us together be led to become well and truly a sacrament of Christ – as individual persons and as members of the one *Mystical Body of Christ*, the Church.