

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B Readings and Commentary

Celebration Summary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD: Today's readings conclude our reflection on the bread of life and include the passage from Ephesians concerning the image of Christ and the church as modeled in the relationship between a husband and wife. Clearly that is enough for any day. The option is given in the second reading to omit the passage about wives being subordinate, and this option should be taken whenever it is likely that the message of the reading, that Christ and the church share a deep and abiding love, might be lost in a strong reaction against the first part of the reading.

The consequences of the bread of life discourse should not be passed over quickly, because what was true in the time of Christ is true today. For many people today, the reality of Christ's gift of his flesh as food is too hard a saying to hear. It is too hard to hear that the presence of Christ in Communion is not some clean, simple matter; it is rather a matter of flesh and blood, of sacrifice in its deepest sense. It is likewise too hard to hear that if we are to imitate the love of Christ it means giving our very lives, our flesh for the sake of another. Too often we would like to avoid sacrifice and skip over the painful parts that are involved in love and just get to the joy. The message today makes it clear that there are no shortcuts to true love.

© 2003, OCP. All rights reserved.

First Reading Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

We will serve the Lord, for he is our God.

A reading from the Book of Joshua

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem,
summoning their elders, their leaders,
their judges, and their officers.

When they stood in ranks before God,

Joshua addressed all the people:

"If it does not please you to serve the LORD,

decide today whom you will serve,

the gods your fathers served beyond the River

or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling.

As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

But the people answered,

"Far be it from us to forsake the LORD
for the service of other gods.
For it was the LORD, our God,
who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt,
out of a state of slavery.
He performed those great miracles before our very eyes
and protected us along our entire journey
and among the peoples through whom we passed.
Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

The word of the Lord.

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b Commentary by Maribeth Howell,

OP: It may be helpful to keep in mind that today's first reading is taken from the conclusion, from the final chapter, of the book of Joshua. Much has transpired since the book's opening verses, where God addressed Joshua, the successor of Moses, and commanded him to lead the people across the Jordan to the land of promise. Although the land would not be acquired easily, Joshua was given specific instructions: "I will be with you...I will not forsake you...above all, be firm and steadfast, taking care to observe the entire law which my servant Moses enjoined on you" (1:5-7).

In her careful study of this material, Pauline Viviano reminds us that the book of Joshua affirms that God is faithful. Israel understood that God was very much involved in history, that God was present to them and with them in the events that brought them into the promised land. At the same time, this book also affirms that the people must assume responsibility in their relationship with God. Note once more the instruction to Joshua to take care "to observe the entire law which my servant enjoined on you" (1:7). It is not only Joshua who must "take care," but it is all of the people.

In today's reading, "Joshua addressed all of the people" and confronts them with a choice. They must decide whether or not they will serve the God of their ancestors. It is a choice that Israel had to make over and over again; it is a choice that we must make each and every day.
© 2003, OCP. All rights reserved.

Second Reading (longer form) Ephesians 5:21-32

This is a great mystery, regarding Christ and the Church.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

Brothers and sisters:

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.

For the husband is head of his wife
just as Christ is head of the church,
he himself the savior of the body.

As the church is subordinate to Christ,
so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives,
even as Christ loved the church
and handed himself over for her to sanctify her,
cleansing her by the bath of water with the word,
that he might present to himself the church in splendor,
without spot or wrinkle or any such thing,
that she might be holy and without blemish.

So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself.

For no one hates his own flesh
but rather nourishes and cherishes it,
even as Christ does the church,
because we are members of his body.

*For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be
joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.*

This is a great mystery,
but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

The word of the Lord

Ephesians 5:21-32 Commentary by John Paul Heil: Main Theme:
Husbands LOVE your wives as Christ LOVED the church.

At first this reading sounds rather anti-feminine, as if wives are being denigrated or "put in their place" relative to their husbands--"Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord for the husband is head of his wife." But in the cultural context of the time this is a quite positive statement about women and wives. They are not to be treated (as they often were in antiquity) as mere property of their husbands. "To be subordinate" could perhaps be best paraphrased as "yield to" the love of your husband or "let your husband love you."

This is confirmed by the remainder of the reading. Wives are to be "subordinate" to their husbands, so that their husbands can fulfill the command to love their wives even as Christ has loved the church. This reading then is a celebration of Christ's tremendous love for all of us

as members of the church--the "body" of which Christ is the "head." Not only is the love of Christ, who laid down his life for the church, a model to be followed by husbands in loving their wives, but the love of husbands for their wives is a primary way that Christ as "head" still loves his "body," the church. This reading then elevates the status of marriage as a microcosm within the macrocosm of the mystery of Christ's love for the church.

© 2003, OCP. All rights reserved.

Gospel John 6:60-69

To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said,
"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"
Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this,
he said to them, "Does this shock you?
What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending
to where he was before?
It is the spirit that gives life,
while the flesh is of no avail.
The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.
But there are some of you who do not believe."
Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe
and the one who would betray him.
And he said,
"For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me
unless it is granted him by my Father."

As a result of this,
many of his disciples returned to their former way of life
and no longer accompanied him.
Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?"
Simon Peter answered him, "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."

The Gospel of the Lord

John 6:60-69 commentary by Deacon Owen Cummings: We come to the end of the magnificent sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel. Jesus has told the large crowd following him that he is the living bread

come down from heaven. They are scandalized by him, and many of the disciples broke away, but Peter, as the spokesman for the Twelve, speaks for the first time in this Gospel. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." What does he mean by this? First, notice that he addresses Jesus as "Lord." Jesus is the Kyrios, the manifestation of the invisible Father (see John 1.18). Peter acknowledges here Jesus' divine identity, at least implicitly. Second, as the revelation of the Father, Jesus possesses the eternal life that is rightly God's. He possesses this eternal life because of his identity, and here we need to go back to the very beginning of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1). It is not so much that Jesus has the words of eternal life as that he is the Word of eternal life. He is the Word eternally proceeding from the Father, the very and complete expression of all that the Father is; he is "God's holy one." And this Word becomes incarnate in us through the Eucharist --- the entire thrust of John 6. Jesus, first brought by Andrew to Peter in John 1.41-42, telling Peter that he will be called Kephas/Rock, now opens his lips in this great declaration of faith. But, as we know from Peter's own journey in this Gospel, we must struggle to maintain and develop such faith in the Lord of eternal life.

© 2003, OCP. All rights reserved.