

Good morning everyone,

In our Gospel this Sunday (Twelfth after Trinity) we return to the sequence of readings that began with Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and the following discourse which brings out its meaning especially in Eucharistic terms. We are reminded of the principal celebration and focal point for Christians in which Jesus is experienced as our bread of life, food for the journey towards the eternal banquet of life. But as all our readings show, faith, life lived in the Spirit of God is a free choice for each person to make. It is not a given, not something any ritual or other action can create. It is always about our discernment of the presence and love of God, and our worship, work and behaviour must be in response to that. How will we respond?

Joshua 24: 1 – 2 & 14 – 18

Towards the end of his active career, if not his life, Joshua gathers the newly settled tribes of Israel together to renew their covenant with Yahweh (the Lord). They are presented with a choice of whether they choose the Lord their God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them home to the land of their ancestors, or to serve the gods of the Amorites (Canaanites) who were living among them? Joshua makes it clear where he and his family stand. They will serve the Lord. But the people must freely choose.

Of course, we no longer worship or believe in 'gods.' But other things have taken their place and crave our attention or obsession if not our devotion, including material possessions and our own self-image or egos. These are today's idols and an obstacle to our relationship with the Ultimate live-giving Reality that we call God.

This passage is chosen to relate to the Gospel today, where the choice for or against Jesus is presented as a choice between life and death.

(Note: 'Beyond the River' is mentioned twice. The River, capital R, always means the Euphrates. Abraham, the father of Israel originally lived beyond the Euphrates, in Mesopotamia (the land covering much of modern-day Iraq), a name which means 'between the rivers,' the Euphrates and the Tigris).

Psalm 34: 15 – 22

I have been forgetting to comment on the psalms which are now a regular part of our liturgy of the word. Apologies! These are selected to compliment the three principal readings. This one is a 'wisdom psalm,' with each verse or pair of verses urging faithfulness to God which will lead to peace, security and prosperity. In its original Hebrew form it is an acrostic with the beginning of each verse following an alphabetical succession of letters. We will recite only part of it but the whole psalm expresses the awesome, attractive but challenging presence of the Lord.

('I am daunted by it but with my whole being I long for it.' – St Augustine)

Ephesians 6: 10 – 20

The spiritual struggles we all face are highlighted in this concluding chapter. Paul frequently uses images from games and gladiatorial shows which would have been familiar to his first readers. But here the images are in stronger military terms and speak of real spiritual warfare. The Christian is engaged in a 'battle' against evil, but it is fought in the context of prayer, spiritual discipline and integrity, and confidence in the ultimate victory of God (1: 20

– 22). This struggle is all part of God’s amazing plan to restore peace and justice to the cosmos by bringing all things under Christ (1: 10).

(‘The devil he got a right to fight, but he ain’t got no right to win!’ – *Augustus Marwiah, African evangelist*).

John 6: 56 – 69

Today we read John’s concluding section of the Eucharistic discourse, of Jesus as the bread of life. The stress here is that flesh (the physical being alone) is like food that perishes. Jesus has come in the flesh, yet he is endowed with the life-giving Holy Spirit. So his bread: his life, his words and actions, and even his death, are life-giving.

But each person in the crowd, and each subsequent reader of the Gospel, must choose whether to accept or reject the offer and the challenge that Jesus brings to the world. Many of his first followers drifted away, just as many today drift away because the demands of discipleship are too unpalatable for them. Faith is a choice but also a gift from God. Another follower, even one of the Twelve (Judas Iscariot) will betray Jesus. We may like to consider what it means to betray Jesus today. In contrast, Peter, on behalf of the disciples, makes a committed declaration of faith in Jesus, something all true followers must continue to do, not just with their words but by the way they live. John always describes the choice in strong terms: do we accept Jesus and his offer of eternal life, or do we reject him? There appears to be no half-way house.

A prayer for this Sunday:

Faithful God of the covenant, in the daily choices we have to make, give us the courage to opt always for Jesus and the life and ways he brings to us, and help us to remain close to him. Bless the difficult road we sometimes have to take without seeing where it will lead us. Keep us from making half-hearted decisions where we have not enough faith, and always to accept the consequences of the choices we do make. Keep us always faithful and focused on the one who gives our life its right direction, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wishing you all a blessed Sunday and week to come.

Love and prayers,

John