

21st Sunday, Year B: Josh 24:1-2, 15-18; Jn 6:60-69. Eph 5:25-32

Homily

Today is the last within this liturgical year that we shall hear from John, next weekend, we shall be returning to the Gospel of Mark. Our reading of the Bread of Life discourse which started on the 17th Sunday, weeks ago, concludes today. While this discourse centers on Jesus as the bread of life, it has led us to contemplate the dynamics of faith and unbelief. Today, the central theme or message is “making choices” This stands out in the first reading and the Gospel. We are invited to choose Christ who is the bread of life. In doing this we are able to say “yes” to full life over mere existence. Remember the saying attributed to St. Irenaeus “the glory of God is man (and woman) fully alive.

The two outstanding figures in Israelite’s early history, Abraham and Moses belong to a time when the people were desert nomads. A dramatic change to their ways of life came when they became settlers in the promised land (the Mediterranean), ancient near east. During this turning point in their history, there stands the towering figure of Joshua, the son of Nun. Joshua was Moses’s commandant and at the death of his master, he became the leader of the people of Israel . He is celebrated as the bravest field commander in Jewish history. At the North American military academy of West Point , Joshua’s name appears in the Hall of Fame. His story is one long military adventure or one long tale of violence, depending on how one chooses to look at it. When he became an old man and the country was resting from War, hostilities, and conflicts, he calls all the tribes to the ancient sanctuary at Shechem. The story of this meeting is told in our first reading of this mass.

All the people were called to listen to the last farewell of their distinguished leader. He did not go into the list of their exploits/achievements. He asks them to choose whom they wished to serve: the God of their ancestors or the small and false gods of the Canaanites whose lands they now inhabit. Joshua is tired. He was old and death was already steering at him. He had seen so much bloodshed to boast of the beauty of battle. He had seen so many ruined cities and wasted lives to boast of the beauty of battle or glories of war. He is now concerned with the geography of the heart. He knew that all choices need to be renewed, that people don’t stay dedicated to a cause just by merely continuing to exist. Joshua won the battle of his life by leading his people to a victory of fidelity, of faith, of a credible choice of life over mere existence. They declared in unison, “we shall serve the living God, for he is our God”.

This choice is echoed in today’s Gospel. Jesus offers his disciples the choice of either staying with him or joining the ranks of the unbelieving Jews. The disciples, although having the choice of closing the book of their shared past, chose to stay with Jesus. Today, we are invited to re-examine our past, our choices. Past choices can become old and rusty and exhausted. They can die from abandonment or forgetfulness. Past choices can be kept alive by renewals because decisions in faith are never done and dusted once and for all. What are our attitudes at the moment? What choices did we make in the past or even recently, are we still true to them? Do they need renewal or re-strengthening? Nobody lives a life without any stain or mistakes. Great men and women in history reveal that they have their worst and best moments. They have their critics and begrudges just as they have their admirers and followers. The central strand in their lives is that they are victors and survivors. They never give up. They were bitten to the ground several times, but they stood up tall again several times and they are still standing. Millions have enjoyed them, loved them, envied them and even hated them. They have shone like shooting stars and they have plummeted like falling stars. They have known both intense glory and humiliating defeat. They have been refined by their strength and vulnerabilities. Our choices and actions matter at all times. The human spirit is indomitable, especially with God at the centre.