

SUNDAY 21-B (HOMILY 02)

“The Journey into Deeper Faith”

(Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Psalm 34; Ephesians 4:32-5:2, 21-32; John 6:53, 60-69)

Have you ever wondered why the readings in the Sunday liturgy are placed the way they are?

Norman Bonneau, in his article in the July-August issue of *Celebrate*, has an insightful, one sentence explanation which runs as follows: “The first reading from the Old Testament recalls a biblical story of which Jesus, proclaimed in the Gospel, is the climax and the fulfillment, interpreted and appropriated for Christian life as exemplified in the second reading.”

In short, the first reading prophecies, the gospel fulfills and the second reading testifies. That description certainly fits the readings for today that call us into a journey of faith in Jesus Christ as the Holy One of God, the Bread of Life.

The first reading pre-figures Christ in many ways. Moses was the great Lawgiver of the Old Testament, prefiguring Jesus who is the new Law. Moses led the chosen people out of slavery in Egypt by means of a the flesh and blood of a Paschal Lamb; Jesus would deliver us from the power of sin, evil and even death as the Lamb of God by the sacrifice of his own flesh and blood.

But Moses never made it into the Promised Land. That would be left up to Joshua who became leader after Moses. In today’s reading, we see Joshua gathering together all the people of Israel in the desert for a retreat, just before crossing the Jordan. He has one goal in mind – to free the people from any attachment to the gods that their ancestors served, and from any attachment to the gods that the Ammorites served, in whose land they were situated. He issued a clarion call to monotheism, to a new and more pure religion, to faith in the One God of Israel who had freed them from slavery. And the people respond exactly as he hoped – they too would serve the One God they had come to know through Moses.

It is no incidental thing that the challenge of Joshua to the people included the rejection of idolatry, of the gods of their ancestors and the Ammorites. To follow one God who is invisible, who works in our lives in mysterious hidden ways, who wants a personal relationship of love and intimacy with us, has always been and will always be a challenge to walk in faith, and faith is not something that comes naturally.

What is much more natural is to fall for the temptations to place our trust in what we can see and feel, in things like possessions, prestige and power. Those are the temptations that Israel has always faced and failed to resist, in spite of all the wonders that God did for them. Those were the temptations that Jesus, the new Israel, faced in the desert, and rejected totally. These are the temptations that will always continue to haunt us as we seek to be moulded into the new people of God, the new Israel.

These temptations make themselves felt in our lives by the reality of addictions. When we fall for these temptations, we betray our destiny to be truly free in a close relationship with the one God, and we become entangled with these false gods that always seem so alluring and pleasant, but that will trap us, addict us and destroy us in the end.

So the first reading ends with Joshua and the people affirming their faith in the One God of Israel, a major step forward in their communal religious life as a people.

The Gospel picks up where the second reading leaves off, with a new challenge. Jesus is speaking to the descendants of the tribes that crossed over into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. Only now he presents them with the next step on their faith journey, a paradigm shift from belief in one God, to belief in him as the Son of God, the Bread of Life, the one who was sent by God to truly liberate them from sin and evil and to give them a share in God's own life.

Jesus pulls no punches. He does not soften down his teaching. They would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood if they were to share in this eternal life here and now. A devout Jew, however, was taught never to drink blood, out of respect for the blood that had freed them from slavery in Egypt. How could this be? This was too hard a teaching for them, too great a step to take, and many stopped following him.

The apostles had by now, however, come to a deep enough understanding and faith in Jesus to know that what he was teaching was true. Even though they did not understand it fully, and even feared where it might take them, they had the insight to see that the old way of their ancestors was not working, was not really freeing people, and so they made a leap of faith and put their trust in Jesus. Peter, the stumbling yet courageous leader, expressed their faith for them: "Lord, where else would we go? We have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God."

So now we are at the stage of faith in Jesus as the Son of God, the New Law, the New Israel, the Holy One of God, the Messiah.

Enter the second reading. The liturgy wastes no time in spelling out what this new found faith means. Paul does not mince words either as he clearly equates faith in Jesus with being the Church, the Body of Christ, whose task it is to put flesh to the love of Jesus for all the world.

And that takes us to the present moment. We are gathered today as the people of God, much like Joshua gathered the people in the desert. And today the Church, much like Joshua, asks us to take one step further in faith, from faith in One God, to faith in Jesus as the Son of God, to belief in the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Jesus, his Body and Blood that was given up for us on the Cross.

The words that Jesus used in the gospel to elicit faith in Him as the Son of God are Eucharistic words. He asks us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He had in mind the

goal of this centuries long journey of faith begun in the desert of Ur by our father in faith, Abraham, and his countless descendants, leading to this time, this day, and this place.

The goal is a Eucharistic faith, recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread, receiving him by means of Word and Sacrament, and being transformed by him into the Church, his Body, sent out to spread the Good News that the Kingdom of God promised to the ancients, is now here, present in His people.