

"Choose this day whom you will serve."

We heard these words in our Old Testament lesson from Joshua.

"Choose this day whom you will serve."

Joshua is issuing a challenge to his people. They had spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. They had fought to enter the promised land. And after all that, Joshua calls the people together.

He recounts what God has done for them. He starts all the way back with their distant ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These were the founding generations of then Jewish people. Then Joshua spends a fair amount of time focusing on God bringing the people's ancestors out of slavery in Egypt, under the leadership of Moses. And then he tells how Moses led the people in the wilderness for 40 years. And then Joshua brings the people to the next step, to their generation. Under Joshua's own leadership, God has brought his people safely out of that wilderness back into the Promised Land.

And then after reminding the people of everything God has done for their ancestors and then for them, Joshua asks the big question. Joshua asks the people to recommit to following God. He says, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

Joshua is telling the people that they have to make a choice. Serving God is not automatic. Serving God is something that has to be done intentionally. Joshua is asking them to re-up with God, to reaffirm their relationship, to pledge to continue to follow and serve him.

God has done his part. Now the people have to decide. "Choose this day whom you will serve." Joshua's challenge is pretty clear.

And Joshua's personal answer is also clear. Joshua's statement is one of the more popular verses from this book. You can buy hundreds of different versions of it to display in your home.

After asking the people to decide whether they will follow God, Joshua says clearly, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua enthusiastically affirms his desire to follow God. And the people respond accordingly. They say:

"Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods... Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."¹

Our Old Testament lesson stops there. But in the following verses Joshua pushes back. He basically says, 'Are you sure? This is not a light promise... this is serious stuff.'

¹ Josh 24:16, 18

But the people are adamant: "We will serve the LORD!"²

Joshua is clear that following God needs to be an intentional choice. And the people respond that they do indeed want to continue to follow God.

In our Gospel reading from John, people are again required to decide, they are again required to make a choice. This is our 5th of 5 readings from the 6th chapter of John.

In the first reading back on July 25, we heard the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus fed the multitude with 5 loaves and 2 fish. The next 3 Sundays we've heard Jesus talking about the larger meaning of that feeding. Jesus has been talking to the people about the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. He has told the people that he is the true, living bread from heaven, that he is the food that God provides, that he is the source of eternal life.

As I mentioned last week, the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood is absolutely abhorrent to good Jews.

Thus in today's reading, we're told about the people reaction. And for the most part, their reaction is NOT positive. It's hard to say if they're mystified or upset. But they don't like what Jesus say is saying.

In fact, we're told, point blank, "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'"³

Don't let your old Sunday school pictures throw you. "Disciples" here is not just the inner circle of the twelve. It includes a much larger number of those attracted to Jesus' teaching. At this point we're probably talking about hundreds of disciples.

And for this larger circle of disciples, it is crunch time—this is a watershed moment for them. Many of these followers are confused or upset by Jesus' teaching.

And Jesus is aware of what's going on. He asks, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"⁴

In other words, 'Are you having problems with this bread of life stuff? Are you having problems with the idea gaining eternal life by eating my flesh and drinking my blood? Then how are you going to handle the big miracle that's coming? How are you going to handle my resurrection, and my return to where I was before, to God's heavenly realm?'

And then Jesus follows up with a comment that's a little bit cryptic: " It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."⁵

² Josh 24:21

³ John 6:60

⁴ John 6:61

⁵ John 6:63

It seems that his followers are too tied up and too tangled up with the literal meaning of eating flesh. So, Jesus reminds them, it is God's spirit that gives life. Jesus is saying, 'My words give life. They come from God. Obeying my words gives life'

And he's also telling them, 'Take my life within you. Partake of the true bread that gives life. Make my flesh sacrificed for you spiritually a part of you. It's not about magic earthly bread. It's about heavenly bread.'

But despite all this, John tells us that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."⁶

And so Jesus turns to his inner circle. He asks his core disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?"⁷ It's basically a Joshua moment. Choose this day whom you will serve. Others are leaving. Will the inner circle of disciples also leave?

This may be just a test. But there seems to be some poignancy here as well. People are bailing on Jesus left and right. Will his closest followers do the same?

Simon Peter gives a great answer: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."⁸ Peter is speaking for all of them. He's basically saying, 'The others may desert you, but we're sticking with you. Why? Because we get it.'

"You have the words of eternal life," Peter says. And then he follows up: "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."⁹

Peter's statement is saying to Jesus, 'We believe that you're who you say you are. We believe that God has sent you and that you speak for God. Given that, we have no other reasonable choice—we have to stick with you.'

When push comes to shove, when their backs are against the wall, the disciples, led by Peter, respond with faith. Though Jesus' ministry is turning sour from a PR and membership standpoint, they choose to remain with him.

As Thomas Paine would say, "the summer soldiers and the sunshine patriots" have gone, but Jesus' core disciples remain. It might have been easier to go along with the crowd and desert Jesus, but they have had a special experience of Jesus. Thus, they know that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

Many of us, I suspect, like the disciples in John. Many of us have had some sort of an experience of God's love for us. We've been attracted to Jesus in some way. We've been fed and nourished by Jesus. We may have experienced God's presence in him. And yet we still must

⁶ John 6:66

⁷ John 6:67

⁸ John 6:68

⁹ John 6:69

choose to follow. Every day. We can always bail out on Jesus. True discipleship is an ongoing thing. We have to continue to choose to follow.

And it's not always easy.

The same Peter who promises to stick by Jesus even to the death will eventually deny even knowing him.

James and John will ask for the seats at Jesus' right and left hands in glory, and they promise that they are ready to suffer with Jesus. But when there are positions available on Jesus' right and Jesus' left, it is not James and John nor any of the other disciples who fill them. Instead, the crosses on either side of Jesus are occupied by the two bandits that are crucified with him.

Following Jesus is not always easy. The path is not always a straight line.

The Christian life is all about choosing to follow Jesus, day by day, every day. And if we turn away, we are always invited to turn back.

The famous line from Joshua gives a daily answer, "Choose this day whom you will serve... As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Do you wish to go away? Lord, where else can we go—you have the words of eternal life.

That's your choice.