

Sunday 21

Even for those of us who do not feel at home in the Old Testament, today's reading from the Book of Joshua seem pretty easy to understand. Joshua is about to go to his rest and he wants the people to reaffirm their commitment to the God who had led them out of Egypt and given them a new land. "Choose," he says, "either the gods your father 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." The Lord to whom Joshua refers is of course the Lord who had guided them out of slavery in Egypt into new freedom. The people answer as he wishes. They choose to serve the God of Joshua.

We might feel that we do not share the situation in which the future Israelites addressed by Joshua found themselves. In the ancient world there were many gods. Each nation had its own god or gods. So the situation was polytheistic. But the world in which we live and in which our ancestors have lived for the last 2000 years has been monotheistic. Rome had many gods, but with the coming of Christianity there was just one god left standing, the God of the Jews now understood to have a son, Jesus of Nazareth. Later in the 7th century Mohammed introduce a new interpretation

of this God, but the God of Mohammed is also the god of Abraham and Jesus.

Therefore, in our day there seems to be just two choices: theism or atheism. One believes in God or one doesn't. Or one opts out of the choice by claiming not to know how to answer the question: Is there a God? "Nos," we call them today, and they are growing in numbers. We call such people agnostics, which means that they say: "I don't know if there is or is not a God."

But for us Catholics here in the United States the situation has changed in the past hundred years in another way as well. If one was Catholic a hundred or so years ago here in the United States, one belonged to a group of believers who were clearly distinguishable from the majority of the population which was Protestant. In that day to cease to be Catholic meant to transfer from one's sub-group to the majority Protestant group. It was a change not simply in one's individual beliefs but in one's cultural position. That is no longer the case. We Catholic have been mainstreamed. To be Catholic today is simply an individual and personal choice, and to change from being Catholic to another Christian church or to no church at all does not have much affect on our cultural or even family position.

In our Gospel today the Lord, like Joshua, is calling his hearers to choose. He has presented himself as the bread of life, but many have found his presentation of himself in this way as too challenging. Therefore, as our text says, “many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” His group of followers is hemorrhaging. Will its center also break? So he turns to the twelve and asks them: “Do you also want to leave.”

That is the question which faces a Catholic in the United States today. Some will say: I am not leaving Jesus, but I am leaving this particular Christian church. The same question faces Irish Catholics today, and some of them will give the same answer. Of course some others in both countries may go even farther and say: I don't believe in Jesus anymore, and perhaps I don't believe in a God anymore. I really don't know what I believe or whether I believe at all.

But we who are here this morning, despite all that has happened in Ireland and here to show the sinfulness of the Catholic Church, especially the sinfulness of its leadership, its bishops and priests, repeat Peter's answer to Jesus' question, ‘Do you also want to

leave?’ We say: “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.”

We make an act of faith. We commit ourselves once more to Jesus as our Lord. And then we recall his own words when he told his disciples to listen to their teachers in Israel even if they did not practice what they preached. We also recall that traditional theological position which said that the sacraments do not depend for their validity or effectiveness on the faith or lack of faith of the priests administering them. A sinful priest can celebrate the Eucharist and the Lord is present despite the priest’s personal sinfulness, for it is the grace of Christ which works through this human instrument even if it is itself totally off key.

The pope is in Ireland, a country whose recent voting about abortion and marriage contradicts the positions of our church. We pray that he may find a way to touch the hearts of the Irish people. We also pray that he and the bishops of our church may take concrete actions to remove from office their fellow bishops who have been negligent in removing offending priests from office. The zero-tolerance policy with respect to priests which was implemented some sixteen years ago and which demands that any

priest found guilty of child abuse must be permanently removed from active priestly ministry must now find its companion-piece for bishops who turned a blind eye towards offending priests. They must be removed from office. That is necessary if we are to move forward and if we are to be true to our claim that we are attempting to follow the Lord Jesus.