

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Joshua 24.1-2, 15-18)

Renewal of the Covenant at Shechem

This final chapter of the Book of Joshua shows Israel settled into the 'land flowing with milk and honey', having concluded the great trek of the Exodus. At Shechem they held a great assembly of all the tribes, and renewed the covenant, with promises of loyalty to the Lord. The renewal of the covenant was necessary because in the course of their desert wandering a number of various tribes had joined Moses' original group of escaped slaves, and not all of them had been present at the original covenant.

This scene at Shechem is put in parallel to today's gospel reading because Joshua challenged them to make up their minds whether or not they intended to remain loyal to the Lord, in the same way as Jesus challenges the disciples at the end of the Bread of Life discourse.

The similarity is not only a challenge to loyalty, but specifically to covenant loyalty, since the Eucharistic context of the discourse puts the failure of some of the disciples and the acceptance by Peter and the others into the context of refusing or accepting the New Covenant made by Jesus at the Last Supper.

Question:

What is the connection between the Covenant and our Eucharist?

Second reading:

(Ephesians 4.32-5.1-2, 21-32)

The Mystery of Christ's Love

This final reading from Ephesians is rightly a favourite reading for weddings. The first sentence, of course, is vital to avoid the impression of male chauvinism: wives should be subject to their husbands, but also husbands to their wives! The really enriching teaching, however, is that the devotion and self-sacrifice of husband for wife is seen as a parable for the love of Christ for his spouse, the Church.

The love and devotion of spouses for one another - and it works both way - gains greater dignity from this Christological truth. It is designated as a 'mystery', which in Pauline language does not mean 'something I cannot understand'. It means the great profound truths about God that are to be revealed in these, the last times.

In this case, the 'mystery' is the depths and intensity of Christ's love for his Church, of which the love of spouses for one another is only an echo. The bonding and binding love and self-sacrifice of spouses echoes and reveals Christ's love for the Church. From this comparison, we gain understanding and awe for both members of the comparison. It also nicely sums up the repeated message of Ephesians about unity in the Church.

Question:

What can we learn from married love about Christ's love for the Church?

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Gospel:

(John 6.53, 60-69)

Lord, to whom shall we go?

This parting of the ways at the end of the Bread of Life discourse is not primarily about belief in the Eucharist. It is the starting point, but the lesson is wider.

The Gospel of John is like a series of great forks in the road, one after another leading off the true path. A series of decisions is called for, whether to follow Jesus or not. Or it is like a series of court scenes, except that people are not judged; they judge themselves by their reaction to Jesus: at the marriage feast at Cana, the disciples believe, then in the Temple 'the Jews' reject. Nicodemus sits on the fence. The Samaritan Woman moves from cheeky scepticism to fervent apostleship.

The great scenes in Jerusalem (the man at the Pool of Bethzatha, the blind man in the Temple) ironically show the Jews rejecting Jesus in such a way that they drive others to accept him. Finally, before Pilate, 'the Jews' think they are condemning Jesus when, in fact, they condemn themselves by saying, 'We have no king but Caesar.'

What about the Lord as King of Israel? Day by day, the challenge is aimed at ourselves too: do we believe or betray?

Question:

In what does the choice for or against Jesus consist?
