

Homily for 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Josh 24:1-2,15-18; Ps 33(34); Eph 5:21-32; Jn 6:60-69

Theme: Why serve God and follow Christ today?

In our world today, people serve and worship many idols without knowing it. The most obvious and yet deceptive is the God of money and materialism. There is a craze in the world for material possessions, even in the house of God. Some ministers preach on material blessings as if our eternal lives revolve around our earthly possessions. Are we going to take our possessions with us when we die? As Christians, do we understand the demands of the gospel? Why do we really serve God and follow Christ?

Joshua, in the first reading, presents a choice before the people of Israel. He is at the end of his life and had led the people of Israel, after Moses' death, into the Promised Land. He gathers the people to Shechem, selects their leaders who presented themselves before God. Why bring them to Shechem? The Patriarchs Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, have strong relationships to Shechem (cf. Gen 12:6; 33:18-19). And the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought from Egypt, were buried at Shechem (cf. Josh 24:32. See Gen 50:25; Exo 13:19). He brings them to Shechem so that the lives of their ancestors will be a testimony against them.

We see this connection in the next verse, where Joshua talks about their fathers with particular reference to Abraham. The latter broke away from serving other gods to serving the God of heaven. God chose Abraham, entered a special relationship with him, and revealed his face to the people of Israel beginning from him. Joshua challenges the people now that they have arrived at the promised land to choose whom to serve. Do they want to go to the days before God called Abraham when they serve other gods? Do they want to serve the gods of the other nations around them, the gods of the Amorites? Joshua is very emphatic about his personal decision. 'But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.' Therefore, the people also decided to serve the Lord and gave reasons to follow the Lord. God brought them and their fathers from the land of Egypt, the house of slavery. He did great signs in their sight, preserved them on the way till they reached the promised land, and drove out the other nations to give them a land to settle. For you today, what reason do you have to serve God, or why do you serve God? is it for what you get or want to get from God or because it is intrinsically the right thing to do? Peter gives his own response in the gospel.

Jesus had been speaking about him being the bread of life. He says, 'This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.' (Jn 6:58). When many of the disciples heard this strange teaching, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' So many of the disciples stopped going with him. they could not just accept the teaching of Jesus. The disciple, *mathetes* in Greek, was a pupil or a learner, an apprentice. The Pharisees, Rabbis, Scribes and even John the Baptist had their disciples (cf. Mk 2:18; 7:5; Lk 5:33).

Many people followed Jesus to learn from him as his disciples. Out of that number, he chose twelve (Matt 10:2; Mk 3:16; Lk 6:13) and sent out 72 on a mission (Lk 10:1-17). Therefore, the disciples who left Jesus in this context refer to the many people following Jesus and his teaching. Hence, Jesus turned to the core group, the twelve, to ask them, 'do you want to go away too?' And of course, Peter responded, 'Lord to whom shall we go? you have the message of eternal life.' What was difficult for the disciples to accept? From the passage, we know that it was the teaching of Jesus about the bread of life, claiming to have come down from heaven and equating himself to God. Even among Catholics, is it everyone who believes in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist? Jesus did not try to convince those leaving to stay with him. The easiest thing to have done is to say to the crowd that he was only speaking

in parables or using symbols. But Jesus stood by what he said and did not prevent many of his disciples from going away. Jesus was not afraid to lose followers so long as he was giving them the correct doctrine. Jesus spoke the truth about God's kingdom, even those which were difficult for people to comprehend. Those who wanted to know more about the kingdom of God stayed with him.

Staying with Jesus and knowing the truth about God and his kingdom positively affects how we live and perceive others. In the second reading, Paul focuses on the relationships that should exist between husbands and wives. The relationship of husband and wife is built on that between Christ and the Church. It is a relationship of respect and mutual submission to one another in love. Thus, they make a healthy home where God is loved and revered. Enshrining God in the home and following the teaching of Christ makes the home a domestic church, where God is loved and Christian values transmitted to children and subsequently, to the world.