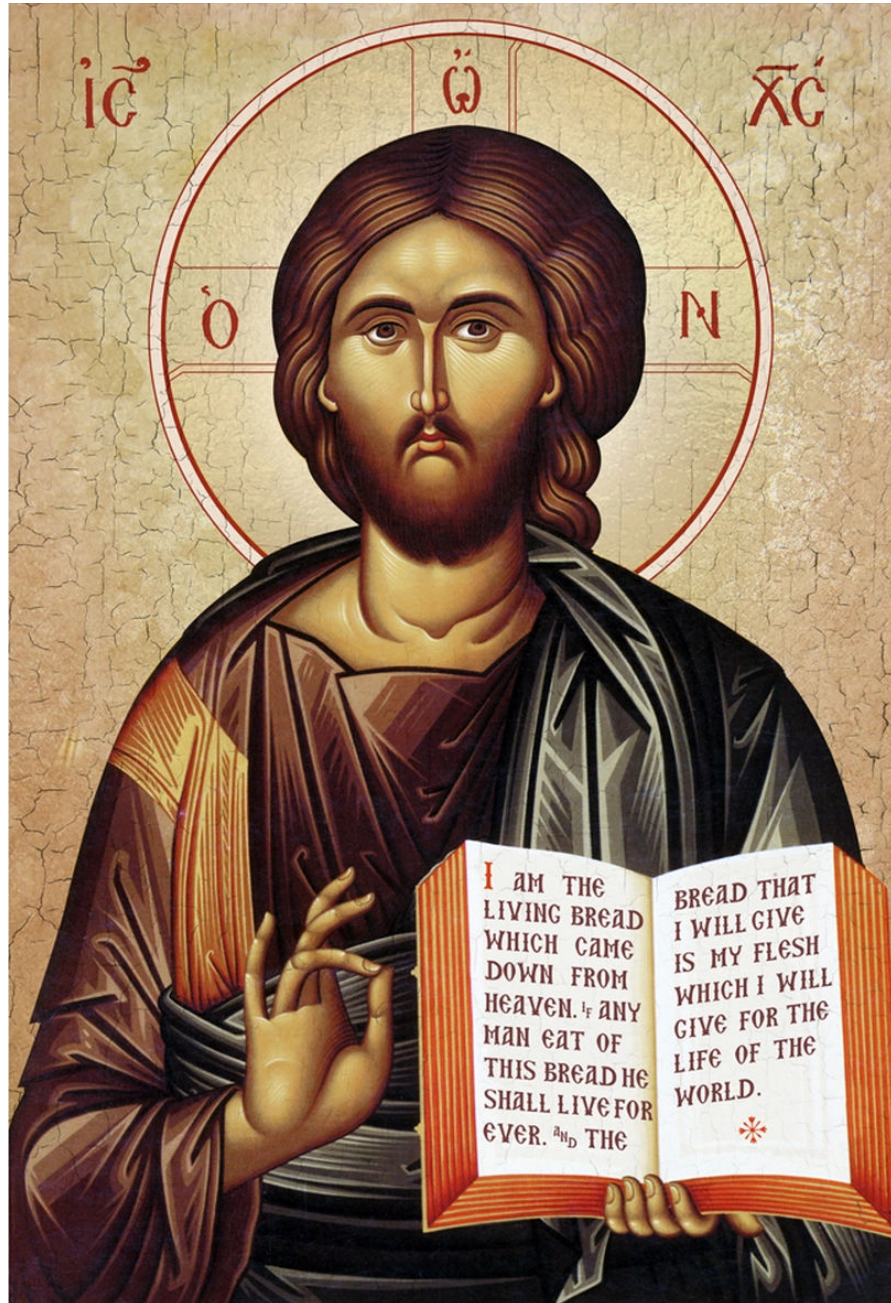


the Sunday Readings



The words that I have spoken to you are, Spirit and Life
(John 6 : 63)

21st Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

21st Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

choose today whom you will serve ¹

introduction

Today's gospel concludes our reading of the rich and lengthy sixth chapter of John's gospel. After presenting himself as, *'the bread of life'*, Jesus starts to reveal that this will cause opposition that will lead to his death. He knows that his followers are finding his words upsetting but he doesn't soften his message in any way. His demanding teaching causes many of his disciples to abandon him.

Jesus asks, *"Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"* Again there is no way that Jesus contemporaries could have understood what he is saying. However, John's audience could understand it. In today's gospel, the phrase, *'Son of Man ascending'* has two levels of meaning, just as does the phrase, *'raised up'*. The phrases refer both to Jesus' crucifixion and to his resurrection. Following Jesus entails conditions that are not acceptable to all.

first reading: Joshua 24 : 1 – 2, 15 – 18 ²

[the people choose to serve the Lord]

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.(1) And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods"(2a) . . . "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord"(15). Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods;(16) for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed;(17) and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God". (18)

This reading extends to the descendants of Abraham, who had remained in the land of Canaan and had not experienced the foundational events of the Moses-movement, an invitation to choose the Lord, the Israelite's *Power for Life-giving* and with whom a covenant had been sealed at Horeb/Sinai. Joshua affirms

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- 1 Cover Image: An Orthodox icon of Jesus' teaching: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (*Jn.6:51*).
 - 2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

there is a liberating agent outside the present system. That agent is reliable and powerful (vv.17-18a).³

Joshua reminds the Israelites that they had earlier submitted their hurts to the power and purpose of the Lord. As well as remembering their past, Joshua's speech acknowledges the present social, religious and cultural fragmentation of the people (vv.1-2,15), or the old system (the clan gods and the gods of Canaan). Joshua reviews for them what the Lord has done for God's people from the time of the patriarchs down through the gift of the new age (vv.1-13). He challenges the northern tribespeople to enter into this same covenant, or alliance, with the Lord. The assembled people replied: "*We too shall serve the Lord, for the Lord is our God*" (vv.24:18).

Joshua offers to incorporate those of the Canaanite region, if they purge themselves of their oppressive ways. They must throw off Baal religion and their clan gods (vv.14-15) and choose the Lord. In the north of Palestine, Judah emerges as a mixture of several southern clans and tribes, including some who are absorbed from among the people of the region of Canaan.⁴ These later people are asked to affirm, '*the Lord's Power for life-giving*'. The Lord had powerfully worked on behalf of the group led by Joshua.

These Canaanites hadn't been to Egypt. They hadn't benefitted from the liberation from slave work. They hadn't been saved in the wilderness (v.17). They hadn't experienced the revelation at Horeb. However, they are not Canaanites and they share a common origin with Joshua's group. The covenant code or alliance sealed at Mt. Horeb by Moses is here represented by Joshua and adopted by these other groups, who had not yet heard about it.⁵ The new people accept the challenge on the basis of what the Lord has done for Joshua's people. The Lord had initiated that relationship. The sensible thing for the northern tribespeople to do, is to respond to the Lord with love and fidelity. By this covenant, northern tribes became part of the people of God.

response: Psalm 34 : 1 – 2, 15 – 22

[The Lord hears the cry of the just]

*I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.(1)
My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.(2) . . .
The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.(15)
The face of the Lord is against evildoers,*

3 [v.1] *Schechem* – became an important Israelite cultic and political centre. It was one of the few major cities in Canaan not described as destroyed by the Israelites. Apparently it was incorporated into Israel peacefully. Early Israel then was a confederation of originally disparate groups unrelated by blood or common experience.

4 [v.15] '*The gods your ancestors served*' – Abraham's ancestors were polytheists.

5 Cf. *Ex.21:1 – 23:19*

*to cut off the remembrance of them
from the Earth.(16)
When the righteous cry for help,
the Lord hears, and rescues them
from all their troubles.(17)
The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.(18)
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord rescues them from them all.(19)
He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.(20)
Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous
will be condemned.(21)
The Lord redeems the life of his servants
none of those who take refuge in him
will be condemned.(22)*

The speaker emphasises 'receiving'. The 'up-right ones' are those who have undergone a transformation. They receive the Lord's 'power for life-giving', or 'grace' and act out of that power. Their power to act, is derived from the Lord's empowering. They enjoy a bias in the Lord's favours. It is the upright whom the Lord sees, hears, is near to, and delivers. They aren't necessarily good, these upright ones. They're the socially marginal. They no longer expect the dominant society to help them.

The Lord is their only alternative source of help. The structures of the dominant society have reduced people to helplessness but such structures are made provisional by this appeal to the Lord, by these people. Such people aren't hated because they are marginal or because they are upright. They're hated because they look to the Lord. The Lord's bias is for 'the broken-hearted and the ones with crushed spirit' (v.18). That is, the Lord is not with those who go from success to success. The speaker affirms that the Lord is precisely with those to whom the dominant system denies success.

second reading: Ephesians 5 : 21 – 32

[the Christian household]

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.(22) For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour.(23) Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.(24) Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,(25) in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word, (26) so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without

blemish.(27) In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.(28) For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,(29) because we are members of his body.(30) "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh".(31) This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.(32)

Paul defines the Christian faith by gathering various traditions and conventions from Israelite culture. The Christian community was divided, even in this early stage. There was talk of schism. Non-Israelite Christians had begun to separate from Israelite Christians. Paul uses the 'house-rules', that governed the mutual relationships to combat potential divisions within the Christian community (vv.21-24).⁶ He expands on the section of these rules about the relationship between husbands and wives. His purpose was to show the Christian community's relationship with Christ; their relationship to one another; and their relationship to God's wider purpose. It reflects the thinking and social structures of the time of writing in which the climate was overwhelmingly patriarchal. The 'house-rule' that enjoined wives to be submissive, is frequently taken out of this context by modern Christians. Understanding the injunction as a remnant of outdated cultural and social patterns, allows us to hear the real message – which is about preserving the unity of the community.

Paul, in fact, modifies the patriarchal code by replacing patriarchal domination with the Christian command (which the writer repeats three times) – husbands are commanded in vv.25, 28 and again in v.33 to: "*love your wives . . . according to the example of Christ*".⁷ Jesus' commandment, '*love your neighbour as yourself*',⁸ is applied to the marriage relationship for the husband (vv.29-32). The relationship of Christ to the Christian community becomes the example for a husband. Christ's self-giving love for the Christian community, is to be the model for the love relationship between husband and wife.

gospel reading: John 6 : 60 – 69

[the words of eternal Life]

When many of Jesus' disciples heard it they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"(60) But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you?(61) Then what

6 *Ephesians* 5:21-6:9 *Col.3:18-4:1* and 1 *Pt.2:18-3:7* give a similar listing of household duties where the inferior is admonished first (wives, *Eph.5:22*; children, *Eph.6:1*; slaves, *Eph.6:5*), then the superior (husbands, *Eph.5:25*; fathers, *Eph.6:4*; masters, *Eph.6:9*). Paul varies this pattern by an emphasis on mutuality (see *Eph.5:20*); use of Old Testament material about father and mother in *Eph.6:2*; the judgment to come for slave-owners (you have a Master in heaven, *Eph.6:9*); and above all the initial principle of subordination to one another under Christ, thus effectively undermining exclusive claims to domination by one party. Into the section on wives and husbands an elaborate teaching on Christ and the church has been woven (*Eph.5:22-33*).

7 Elizabeth Schussler Florenza says it like this: "*The patriarchal-societal code is theologically modified in the (writer's) exhortations to the husband . . .*"

8 *Lv.19:18*

if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?(62) It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and Life.(63) But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.(64) And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."(65) Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.(66) So Jesus asked the Twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"(67) Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.(68) We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."(69)

Jesus' original listeners were scandalised by his claim to be, *'the Wisdom of God – the true bread from heaven'* for the believer. Later, this inter-change was used in the light of the Last Supper, to emphasise the necessity for the Messiah to *'take flesh'*, to *'suffer and die on a cross'* and *'rise'*, so that God's Spirit could come down and give eternal life to the world. Jesus had been teaching at the synagogue at Capernaum. The crowd had hopes of *a second Moses*, who would restore *'the manna'*, or *'bread from heaven'*. Jesus offers something better than *'manna'*. He offers, *'the Bread of Life'*. More than that; *'He is the Bread of Life!'* After hearing this many of his followers said: *'This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?'*⁹ The claim which they understood and find so distasteful, is that, *'Jesus is the life-giving Word of God'*. There's no mention of any refusal to eat his flesh, or to drink his blood.

Jesus asks what they will think if they see him ascending to where he was before (v.62). He uses the term, *'Human one'* (*'Son of man'*), to identify himself with the heavenly figures in *the Books of Daniel and Enoch*. When Nicodemus couldn't understand how a man could be begotten from above, *'of water and spirit'*, Jesus explains this through the ascension into heaven of *the Human one*. That is, *the ascended, Human one*, gives the Spirit.¹⁰ The Spirit is the divine principle informing the Human one. That movement *'from above'* is the only *Power for life-giving*, or *Source of grace*. Jesus isn't speaking of *'eucharistic flesh'*, but of *'flesh'* as he spoke of it to Nicodemus. This *'flesh'* is the natural principle in people. It cannot give eternal life. John stresses that the Spirit is given only when Jesus is *'raised up'*.

Earlier John described *'the Bread from Heaven'* as, *'real'*.¹¹ This meant that this Bread belongs to the heavenly, eternal realm, as opposed to the merely natural and passing realm. The realm of *'the real'*, is the realm of *'the Spirit of Truth'*. If Jesus is divine revelation come down from heaven like bread, to nourish people,

9 Jn.6:60 NJB

10 Cf. Jn.3:13

11 Cf. Jn.6:32

his purpose is to communicate to them, *'the principle of eternal life'*. Those who accept the words of Jesus, will receive, *'the Power for life-giving of the Spirit'*.

Jesus repeats what would-be disciples must believe (vv.64-66). Believing in Jesus and coming to him, means the same. The final reaction of most of the disciples will be one of disbelief. After this sequence of events, Jesus will go to Jerusalem to teach. In Mark, the story of Jesus' practise in Galilee, ends in a similar climate of general disbelief. And Jesus' activity in Jerusalem will also end in the same climate of disbelief and rejection.¹²

But the Twelve believe (vv.68-69). The majority of disciples do not believe (v.66). Later, even though a few in the Sanhedrin believe, the majority of the leaders and the people will not believe in him. The description of the Twelves' belief is similar to the scene at Caesarea Philippi in the Synoptics, where the incident is part of the sequence about the second multiplication of the loaves.¹³

for sharing:¹⁴

- *The tradition is open to include others who have not experienced Israel's foundational experience. Comment on Joshua 24 : 1 – 2, 15 – 18*
- *Tendencies to patriarchy in the reader/listener are radically questioned. Our performance as disciples is under scrutiny. Comment on Ephesians 5 : 21 – 32*
- *Jesus' original listeners were scandalised by his claim to be 'the true bread from heaven for the believer'. Comment on John 6 : 60 – 69*

12 Cf. *Jn.12:37*

13 Cf. *Mt.16:16 & Lk.9:20 Jn.6:60–69* refers more to themes of *Jn.6:35-50* than to those of *Jn.6:51-58* and seem to be addressed to members of the Johannine community, who found it difficult to accept the high christology reflected in *the bread of life discourse*.

14 *Lectio Divina*: reading God's Word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

prayer:¹⁵

*In every age, O God,
 You give Your people freedom
 to walk in faith, or to turn away.
 Grant us grace
 to remain faithful to Your Holy One,
 whose Words are Spirit and Life,
 Jesus Christ, our Lord,
 who lives and reigns with You
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 God for ever and ever. Amen.*

the review:¹⁶

Faith is a divinely given disposition of the mind by which we begin to share in God's understanding of God's Self. In faith, we think of the history of humankind and our own story as would-be disciples of this love of God for us, as revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, made flesh. God's understanding of God's Self is the Father's eternal speaking of the Word (which is the Father's begetting of the Son). Faith is belief, first of all in God. For would-be disciples, to whom the gospel has been preached, it entails believing all that is revealed by God, simply because it is the Word of God handed down to us in Christ's community, through the tradition of the Scriptures.

"I have faith. Help my lack of faith".¹⁷ We can fail in the exercise of faith, if we clearly and consciously reject the tradition of God's revelation. We also fail to some degree, if we do not frequently reflect on what God has done for us in Christ, or if we neglect opportunities for finding out more about the gospel. Finally we fail in the exercise of faith, if we are not willing to explain our belief to those who seriously enquire of us.

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15 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

16 the review: – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

17 Mk.9:24