

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time B - Following God Is a Difficult Thing, God requires things of us.

August 22, 2021.

Following God Is a Difficult Thing, God requires things of us. The ancient Israelites in the first reading (Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b) are a good illustration. Much of the history of Israel, at least that part that's shown to us in the Old Testament, is a constant saga of the people falling away from the Lord. Israel had a series of prophets who were constantly calling the people back to the way of the Lord when they strayed. Joshua was one of the better known prophets. He reminded the Israelites all that God had done for them. Joshua reviewed the founding of the people under Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reminded them how God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. How God supported them as they took possession of the Promised Land. **Joshua then called the people to be more faithful to the Lord and renewed with them the Covenant that had been made so many years before between God and Moses.** It carries with it obligations. Just as the Israelites had requirements for following God, all of life, even today, has requirements. However, a covenant is more than a contract. A covenant has to do with relationships and it is supposed to be binding for life. **Life comes with obligations. No one can escape them.** Those who try usually end up on the fringes of society—in jail, perhaps, or homeless. But some obligations are easier than others. And sometimes our perceptions of what is an acceptable obligation changes with the passage of time. The verses from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians are an excellent example of this kind of change (5:21-32). Many people today find words such as "obey" or "submit" when talking about husbands and wives to be offensive. Wedding ceremonies no longer ask the bride to promise to obey her husband. But if we take a broader view and don't get hung up on the specific language, we can see that this entire passage is about mutual surrender, in imitation of the love between Christ and the Church.

In the Gospel reading from John (6:60-69), Jesus tells us the necessity for us to live up to obligations. Jesus knew this better than any of us. Think for a minute about the absolute dedication with which he lived up to his obligations to God. Our society recognizes no greater heroes than those who lay down their lives for the sake of others. Firefighters, police, soldiers, whenever they lose their life in the line of duty, become instant heroes for us. Jesus is perhaps the prime example — he voluntarily allowed his life to be sacrificed on the cross — a sacrifice that, we believe, atones to this day for our sins. **One of the obligations we have in life is to sacrifice something of value for the greater good.** It rarely reaches the stage of the ultimate sacrifice, giving one's life, but there are many other smaller sacrifices along the way that are expected of us. Who among us would not postpone some sort of personal pleasure like buying a new suit or dress, or going to see a show, if it meant taking money away from buying medicine for our child? It used to happen all the time and hopefully still does, that someone will give up a comfortable seat on a bus in order to allow a frail elderly person to sit. Who would avoid the responsibility to quickly try to come to the aid of someone who has tripped and fallen? **Our obligation is to be there for one another, even if it means some sacrifice on our part.**

Unfortunately we sometimes fail to do the right thing. If you saw someone back into someone else's unoccupied car in a parking lot and leave a big dent or broken headlight, and then just drove away, would you take the time and effort to leave a note on the windshield giving the license plate of the inconsiderate person? Or would you do nothing because you just did not want to get involved? If you saw someone doing something — not only illegal, but clearly dangerous, like jaywalking with a small child — would you interrupt? Or would you try to avoid earning the anger of the jaywalker? There are times when we think it is just too much trouble, or too dangerous, or perhaps just not worth the effort, to do what society calls us to do. It is

quite normal for us to go through periods of doubting especially the teachings of the Lord. It is quite normal for us to want to stand on the material world of our senses and ignore the new world of the spiritual. When these types of doubts come to our mind, be they flashing through, or lingering and challenging us, we need to stop and consider the Gifts of the Lord. We need to reflect on our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We are human, but we have been entrusted with the mystery of the Divine. We have been given the Gift of the Eucharist. And Jesus said in today's gospel, **"It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is to no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life."**

Jesus had given his disciples and us a teaching that demanded our absolute trust in Him, our absolute faith in Him, even though this teaching was completely against what our eyes, ears and senses were telling them. He told his disciples that He was the Bread of Life. He told them that they needed to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood for them to have eternal life. For some of the disciples, this was too hard to accept. They were convinced that the spiritual would not make such outlandish demands on their senses. They left Jesus and returned to their previous lives. Jesus was not going to rescind a word. He came to make the spiritual real. He came to bring a reality to the world that was beyond the capacity of man to understand. He came to bring the Gifts of God that were far greater than man's fondest hopes. He would not compromise the truth. "Will you go, also, Peter?" he asks the leader of his Twelve. **"Lord, where can we go, you alone have the words of eternal life."** And with that confession of faith, Peter stays on the floating island of hope and faith. He did not know with his senses how it is possible for Jesus to give His Body and Blood for the food they would need for the journey to God. But he knew with his heart that all was beautiful with Jesus and that it would be infinitely foolish to trust in the senses rather than trust in the Lord. What about us? Jesus is still asking us the same question, so do we stay or do we go away? Who or what do we want to serve? Following Jesus needs a personal commitment at the level of the heart and of the mind to live by the values of Christ. Christ invites us to surrender and entrust ourselves to him on the way to the Father. This means learning to rely on God rather than on ourselves when the road ahead is uncertain and the light is dim.

Lord Jesus, we know you want us to follow you. At times in our life, we find ourselves asking more questions about what we need to do, what we are still lacking than simply loving you in prayer. Help us to take the next step to put you at the centre of our life. **Increase our faith and trust in your word. Help us to welcome your revelation as truth that guides our vision and actions. Help us to read the signs of the times, to encourage others along the path of truth, and to stand firm in the faith. "Do not look forward in fear to the changes in life; rather, look to them with full hope that as they arise, God, whose very own you are, will lead you safely through all things and when you cannot stand it, God will carry you in his arms"** (Saint Stephen of Hungary)