

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

The theme that holds the readings together today is **choice**: faithfulness to God: **choosing** Jesus and being faithful to him, whom Simon Peter calls “the Holy One of God”.

If we’ve got that radical commitment to Jesus, although we may sometimes be unfaithful, we know that the Lord is always faithful. Even if we go away, he loves us and gently calls us back to him.

Joshua 24:1-2. 15-18 Joshua asks the people to renew **choose** to serve the Lord always.

Ephesians 5:21-32 St Paul speaks about marriage, obedience and fidelity, love and self-sacrifice.

John 6:60-69 Jesus, like Joshua, calls for his disciples to **choose** to remain faithful after some had gone away.



Reflection

The first reading on Sundays is chosen to complement the Gospel reading for that day. Sometimes the connection is bit obscure.

Today the connection is clear: both readings have got to do with one of the most profound realities of life—**human freedom**.

Both readings present this reality in the most dramatic fashion possible—the freedom **to accept or reject God**.

If you look at the whole context of the passage from Joshua, it is unsurpassed in sheer drama. The tribes of Israel are now in the land of promise; they've at last defeated all their enemies. They stand, en masse, before their leader Joshua. Joshua goes through all the adventures they've had from the time of Abraham, about five hundred years ago, down to the present day.

The thread that binds all these adventures together, Joshua says, is **the hand of God**.

He, it was who led their forefathers into the land of Canaan and down into Egypt;

he, it was who brought the people out of that land of bondage, brought them through the wilderness, and

he, it was who now once again brought them into the land of promise.

That's your history, Joshua tells them. Now, **choose**; choose what gods you're going to serve!

Do you want the gods your ancestors had "beyond the River" (beyond the Euphrates)?

Or do you want the Amorite gods who once "protected" this land you've now conquered?

Or will you serve **God**?

It is clear what Joshua expects of them. If they accept the history that he's just detailed, how can they help but choose God?

He it was who brought them here and

he it was made it possible for them to even have a choice.

Joshua's own resounding cry of faith serves as an example to all the others:

“. . . as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!”

You might well wonder whether John had that scene in mind as he recorded the exciting climax of the exchange between Jesus and his disciples.

This was after his teaching about the bread of life. Jesus in his teaching had referred to himself as **the true manna that comes down from heaven**. He had spoken of his own flesh and blood as **the food that gives eternal life**.

Jesus now asks his disciples whether they believe this.

I suppose it's understandable enough that some of them say: "This sort of talk is intolerable! How could anyone accept it!

I suppose it's predictable enough, even though it's sad, that even some of his own disciples should turn away and no longer follow him



Then, like Joshua addressing the twelve tribes, Jesus turns to his own twelve apostles, "Do you want to leave me too?"

Just as the twelve tribes told Joshua that they could hardly reject the Lord who had done all those things for them, so Peter, on behalf of the twelve, asks "Lord, who would we go to?"

And he continues: "You it is who has the message of eternal life; we believe, we know that you are the Holy One of God!"

What's remarkable about both these passages, in the Old and New Testaments, is the **radical freedom** that we human beings enjoy. We are **free** to accept or

reject the ultimate ground of our being, the ultimate destiny of our lives. \you can't have a freedom greater than that

The question is often asked today whether there is a hell. Some people seem to think it's incompatible with a good God. But is it? Hell isn't God's creation. Hell, in its deepest meaning is absolute loneliness, and that is a human creation. Hell is the condition of people who choose not to live with God. It is always a free choice.

Hell is the strongest argument there is for the depths of human freedom. If there wasn't any hell, then we really wouldn't be free to reject God.

Just the very possibility of hell tells us what kind of awesome power the Lord has given us.



But that same awesome power makes it possible for us freely to choose God, to serve the Lord, to accept the words of eternal life, to choose "life and good," not "death and evil" (Dt 30: 15).

The life we live tells God which choice we've actually made.

And that radical choice is always there in spite of our sins.

The twelve apostles are mirrors of ourselves, flawed but graced human beings.



TOWARDS THE SYNOD 2023

Addressing a group of theologians in December 2013, Pope Francis said:

*"By the gift of the Holy Spirit, the members of the Church possess 'a collective understanding of the faith'. This is a kind of 'spiritual instinct' that makes us **sentire cum Ecclesia** [think with the mind of the Church] and able to discern what is in conformity with the apostolic faith and is in the spirit of the Gospel.*

*"Of course, **the sensus fidelium** [the collective understanding of the faithful] shouldn't be confused with the sociological reality of a majority opinion. It is, therefore, important - and one of your tasks - to develop criteria that allow the authentic expressions of **the sensus fidelium** to be discerned. ...This attention is of greatest importance for theologians. Pope Benedict XVI often pointed out that the theologian must remain attentive to the faith lived by the humble and the small, to whom it pleased the Father to reveal what he had hidden from the learned and the clever".*

The Second Vatican Council made it clear that **the sensus fidelium** (the collective understanding of the faithful) does not mean *sensus laicorum*

(the collective understanding of lay people), as if it were a charism granted to the laity in isolation from the Catholic Church hierarchy, and as if the clergy were not included among "the faithful."

To coin a phrase **'we're all in it together!'**