**Twenty-first Sunday of Year B**

**22nd August 2021**

**Mass Readings from The Sunday Missal**

**Reading 1: Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18**

The occasion described in the first reading proved to be a formative moment in Israel’s history. It dates from the time when Israeli culture first clashed with that of Canaan, around 1,200 B.C. In similar situations elsewhere, the incoming culture is sometimes subsumed by the indigenous one, but not here. Israel’s prophets staunchly resisted any compromise and their policy ensured that her unique revelation would survive 3,000 years.

The Canaanites worshiped a number of gods, all called Baal, which simply meant ‘Lord’ Israel worshiped Yahweh (who was sometimes similarly addressed as Baal) and the ceremony described recalls the choice between the two then before the people. Henceforth Yahweh, the God of the invaders, would be worshiped by both groups. Unfortunately, the Canaanites were not consulted and became the Palestinians of to-day. The Philistines also were treated as bitter enemies who occupied what we now call the Gaza strip.

The use of this reading for today is governed by the parallel between the choice made at Shechem and the choice confronting the disciples after the discourse in John 6. The challenge "Choose this day whom you will serve" parallels "Will you also go away?"; and the response "We will serve the Lord, for he is our God" parallels Peter's response, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

**Reading 2; Ephesians 5:21-32**

Here is a reading that generates more heat than light. The Roman Empire was a society where incest, homosexuality, intergenerational sex and exposure of unwanted children were widespread. Judaism had a relatively strict moral code which was popularly thought to be somewhat prudish. Yet, this appealed to a number of Gentiles who were unhappy with elements of the status quo.

Early Christianity seems to have taken over these codes from Hellenistic Judaism, which had itself combined the Mosaic and Stoic traditions. These codes set forth the duties of wives, husbands, parents, children, masters, servants and slaves.

The institution of slavery itself was simply not questioned and neither was the patriarchal culture that still prevails in some societies to-day.

Secondly, the author (Paul?) is not advocating male dominance, but simply using it as an analogy of the relationship of Christ to members of his household.

Thirdly, the reading this week is a skilful weaving together of two themes, that is to say, the duties of husband and wife, and the relation between Christ and the Church.

The problem we have in *The Sunday Missal* is that it is set out in a solid paragraph of prose, where the key words do not stand out. If we read it as set out in the table below, it may be clearer. (The word order of the Greek grammar is different to that in English. Numbers are the verses as found in the Bible)

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| --- | --- |
| A | B |
| 22 Wives should regard their husbands | 22 as they regard the Lord |
| 23 so is a husband the head of his wife | 23 as Christ is head of the Church |
| 24 so should wives be to their husbands {a repetition of v. 22} | 24 as the Church submits to Christ |
| 25 husbands must love their wives | 25-27 so Christ treats the Church, |
| 28 husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; | 28 for a man to love his wife is for him is to love himself |
| 29 A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; | 29-30 that is the way Christ treats the Church, and we are its living parts |
| 31 a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one body *Genesis 2:24* | 32 This mystery has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and the Church. |

In Column A the author sets out the family code as understood at the time. He then provides Christian comments on each of its phrases by notes in column B. As a result, the marriage relationship is transformed from one in which the wife is simply subjected to the husband without qualification into one in which the husband is to devote himself unreservedly to the love of his wife. Thus, the household code is turned upside down— the emphasis rests no longer on the duty of the wife to the husband but on the husband's love for his wife.

Finally, the two columns are clinched by the citation of Genesis 2:24. On one level, this text speaks of the union of husband and wife. But this is a *mysterion*. It has another, higher level of meaning, portraying the unity between Christ and the Church.

It may be said that the author's doctrine of the Church is not built up from below, from the customary understanding of marriage. Rather, his understanding of marriage descends from above, from a theological understanding of the spiritual union between Christ and his Church.

Curiously, last week (The Assumption) we had three passages, all of which were used in senses that the authors would not have imagined. This week we have the opposite lesson as Ephesians reminds us that we cannot always take a Biblical passage and apply it to situations it was never meant to cover.

**Gospel: John 6:60-69**

This forms the conclusion to the discourse at Capernaum on the bread of heaven. Last week the Feast of the Assumption replaced the 20th Sunday and its readings. But the Gospel for this week continues that which we would have had in the regular course and provides us with an apparent contradiction. Last week, we (would normally have) had John 6;51-58, which I suggest you read through. You will notice that Jesus goes on at some length about his flesh which gives life to those who eat it. By this John clearly means us to understand the Eucharist.

But then following verses 51-59, today’s passage appears to contradict that section, especially in verse 63. Having insisted that the believer must eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man in order to have eternal life, Jesus now confusingly tells his hearers that "the flesh has nothing to offer." (Jerusalem Bible. The New Revised Standard Version has “the flesh is useless”)

But, frequently John is deliberately obscure. That is his method and it seems that this is another example. In several places he uses words with more than one meaning and the narrative progresses though misunderstandings. For Christian faith is hidden in the heart and not visible to the outsider. Flesh in verses 52-58 (leading up to our reading) certainly refers to the Communion received in the Eucharist. But "flesh" in the four lines (which are inset in the *Sunday Missal* for to-day) is not the Eucharistic flesh but the flesh of human weakness. It is the same word (sarx) but here, it means "the worldly principle in man which cannot give eternal life"

(The use of a word to stand for opposing ideas is not unknown in the Bible. See for example the serpent/snake which represents both death and eternal life. Also Baptism which stands for Drowning and Birth.)

Spirit on the other hand means what it also means in 3:6—the life-giving Spirit that will be given as a result of the ascension of the Son of Man to where he was before (v. 62). This is an excellent example of John’s literary method, not only by using ambiguity but also of using running themes throughout the Gospel. The subject of the Spirit, starts with the Baptism 1;32-3. It is developed in the conversation with Jewish Nicodemus 3;5-8, an anonymous Samaritan woman, 4;23-4, today’s mixed crowd, 6;51-69, and climaxes with the Spirit of truth 14;17 to 16;13 to the Eleven remaining Apostles.

Last week’s Gospel (would have) told of the Jews arguing over the meaning of ‘eating the flesh of Jesus’ which to a disciple would mean the Eucharist. This week’s tells of the schism when ‘many’ disciples left, leaving the Twelve, loyal despite not understanding.

This particular passage, therefore, has moved on from simply speaking of the Eucharist to the knowledge of Jesus as the heavenly wisdom, the bread from heaven. In other words, it refers back to verses 35-50, not to verses 52-59.

John tells us that at this time “many of his disciples left him” but does not tell us why. It may be that it is Jesus' claim to be the revelation of God in verses 35-50 that they could not accept, or it may be the more crude Eucharistic teaching of verses 52-59. Yet, there are some who do accept his claim, namely, the Twelve.

This scene performs the same function in John as the episode at Caesarea Philippi does for the Synoptics and like that concludes with a confession of Peter as spokesman for the Twelve in both places.