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God's Graced Initiatives

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August 25, 2024: Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Joshua 24.1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Ephesians 5.21-32; John 6.60-69

Moses, the great prophet of the Exodus, dies just outside the Promised Land. He announced that “A prophet like me will the LORD, your God, raise up for you from among your own kindred; that is the one to whom you shall listen” (Deut 18.15). In one respect, this is Joshua, Son of Nun, who “was filled with the spirit of wisdom, since Moses had laid his hands upon him.” And thus “the Israelites gave him their obedience, just as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Deut 34.9). And yet, Joshua pales in comparison. No sooner is he announced as successor than the text of *Deuteronomy* says, “Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face” (Deut 34.10). The prophet “like me” announced in 18.15 remained an object of Israel’s hope (e.g. John 1.21).

In today’s first reading we encounter Joshua at the end of his life. “[A]fter the LORD had given the Israelites rest from all their enemies round about them, and when Joshua was old and advanced in years” (23.1), he summons the people to renew their covenant vows. Such fidelity was understood as a source of blessing, but it is a caricature to imagine Israel’s relationship with God as a *quid pro quo*. It is a question of reverencing God in gratitude. Here, as at Sinai, Israel pledges her fidelity as a response to God’s free initiative. “For it was the LORD, our God, who brought us and our ancestors up out of the land of Egypt . . . Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God” (24.17-18). More simply, “We love because he loved us first” (1 John 4.9). There is no consideration of rank or rights—only Israel’s desire, in freedom, to serve Him whom she reverences. The covenant renewal under Joshua is one step in this pursuit, but Israel will have to wait for another prophet and a new covenant to reach this goal in full.

Marriage and Imitation of Christ

The second reading, from *Ephesians*, is a difficult and beautiful passage. Speaking to husbands and wives, St. Paul commands us to “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5.21). This aligns with what the apostle teaches elsewhere, when he encourages us to “serve one another through love” (Gal 5.13) and to “do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves” (Phil 2.3).

What is more, this mutual subordination is not only done “out of reverence for Christ” but in imitation of him. The whole passage here about husbands and wives falls within the discussion in chapter 5 that begins with the charge to “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and [to] live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God” (5.1-2). To be clear, both husbands and wives are called to be imitators of Christ, and both are called to subordinate themselves to the other out of reverence for Christ.

Why then does St. Paul shift his emphasis so markedly in what follows? Right after the instruction to be mutually subordinate, the Apostle seems to promote a very lop-sided arrangement, instructing wives to be subordinate because “the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church” (6.2-3). In everything, “wives should be subordinate to their husbands” (6.24).

Here a few observations help us to see what St. Paul is doing. First, notice that while St. Paul speaks *about* men and women, the grammar of the passage shows that he is speaking *to* the men. Consider the last line: “In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.” Second, recall that in the Greco-Roman culture of St. Paul’s day, women were less educated, enjoyed fewer rights, and were generally much younger than their spouses. It was understood and accepted that wives were to be obedient to their husbands. In beginning on this note, St. Paul says nothing the men would find objectionable. And in analogizing them to Christ, St. Paul offers a word that was certain to be well received. It is at this point, however, that St. Paul upends expectations. “You men are the heads? You men are as Christ? Well, he came not to be served but to serve! Your wives are to be subordinate to you? Well, you are to die for them!” What at first glance is received as a mark of privilege and power is shown to be the opposite. The real mark of headship is self-sacrifice—service and not “lording over” (see Matt 20.25-26). So much is this the case that the relation between the spouses becomes all but indistinguishable. Both subordinate themselves to the other out of love for Christ. Both are imitators of Christ in becoming sacrificial offerings to the other.

The Bread of Life

The passage from John’s Gospel concludes the “Bread of Life” discourse in chapter 6. If we are to make sense of some difficult verses in today’s reading, we need look briefly at what Jesus said in verse 22-59. After his miraculous feeding of five thousand (John 6.1-15), Jesus makes his way across the sea of Galilee to the city of Capernaum. The crowds follow, and Jesus admonishes them saying, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled” (6.26). That is to say, they are interested only in physical nourishment—only in food! He continues, “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (6.27). Jesus is this

food. He says of himself “I am the bread of life” (6.35). The rub is to understand just what exactly this means.

The journey of Israel from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land required ongoing faith that God would lead them. Now, to arrive at the real Promised Land of heaven, a similar faith is needed. “This is the work of God, that you believe the one he sent” (6.29). And just as God provided manna from heaven in the wilderness, so now he gives us “the true bread from heaven” which “gives life to the world” (6.32-33). Faith in God—allegiance to God—requires that we receive this bread for our journey.

Looking ahead to the verse in today’s reading which says “the flesh is useless,” many object that the image of Jesus as “bread from heaven” is one a metaphor for belief. This is correct. At least, it is correct in one respect. In *Sirach* 24, the Law is compared to a food which must be eaten. “Come to me, all who desire me, and be filled with my fruits. You will remember me as sweeter than honey, better to have than the honeycomb. Those who eat of me will hunger still, those who drink of me will thirst for more” (Sir 24.19-21). The same is true of Jesus who is the fulfillment of that Law (see Matt 5.17) and is himself “the power and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1.24). As the prophets foretold, “They shall be taught by God” (John 6.45). And in contrast to the Law of old, Jesus says of himself, “whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst” (6.35).

In 6.52, some take offense, saying, “How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat.” If the full truth of what it means to call Christ the “bread of life” were simply that Jesus is the “wisdom of God,” then this would be a misunderstanding quickly done away with. Rather than soften the language, however, Jesus reiterates his claim in language that is more graphic. Using a word that means “to gnaw” (*trōgein*), he says, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (6.53-55). Just as the Israelites journeyed not only by the wisdom of God found in the Law, but also by the actual bread come down from heaven, namely, the manna, so now the same is true of the Church. Indeed, the whole passage is reflective of the structure of the Mass where we receive Jesus in the liturgy of the Word and in the liturgy of the Eucharist. And unlike our “ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever” (6.58).

This leads to the words that begin today’s gospel. “Then many of his disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’” (6.60). And once again, Jesus does not say “You’ve misunderstood me! I mean only that you are to believe in me and follow my teaching.” Rather he leads them to a deeper understanding. Jesus’ words, says St. Augustine, “are an answer to their mistake. They supposed that he was going to distribute his body in bits: whereas he tells them now, that he should ascend to heaven whole and entire” (*Tractates on John* 27, 3). There is no question of consuming a corpse, of eating mere flesh and blood. Such things, by themselves, profit nothing. “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail” (6.63). Why then does Christ say that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood? Well, as Jesus asks, “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before” (6.62)? What if we saw that Jesus’ own flesh and blood were drawn into the fullness of Trinitarian life? Would we then, he asks, understand that it profits us to be joined to his flesh and blood? Flesh and blood in themselves avail nothing, but it is through his flesh and blood that Jesus communicates his life to us. To come in contact with *this*

flesh and blood is not to come in contact with a dead body but a living one! It is to come in contact with the Lord himself. As St. Cyril of Alexandria observes, “Because his whole flesh is utterly united to him [i.e. the *Logos*] and clothed with life giving power, it now ought to be called ‘spirit’ as well” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John* I, iii, 3). Indeed, “this saying is hard,” but where else can we go, for “You have the words of eternal life” (6.68).

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For Further Reading

Bernard Blankenhorn, O.P., [*Bread from Heaven*](#)

Peter Williamson, [*Ephesians*](#)

In Short . . .

- ***Joshua is the successor of Moses. And yet, he is not the prophet “like me” whom Moses announces. The genuine successor to Moses and the real moment of covenant “renewal” are yet to come.***
- ***The choice to “fear the Lord and serve him completely” is not transactional in nature but the free and grateful response to God’s gratuitous initiative.***
- ***The teaching given to husbands and wives falls within the larger concern of Ephesians 5 that all who belong to Christ be imitators of him. The heart of the message to spouses is the need for mutual subordination out of reverence for Christ.***
- ***The Eucharist brings us into union with the living flesh and blood of Christ. And just as Jesus’ own flesh and blood have been drawn into the fullness of divine life, so too will our own.***