

“Hard Teachings”

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle B)

Jos 24:1-2A, 15-17, 18B; Ps 34:2-3, 16-21; Eph 5:21-32; Jn 5:63C, 68C; Jn 6:60-69

Today’s Scripture readings offer us a couple of “hard teachings”

- “Hard teaching” not that they’re necessarily difficult to understand
 - “Hard” in the sense they can be difficult to accept...
- In Ephesians, ch 5: St. Paul addresses the Christian household
 - Specifically, proper relationship btwn husbands & wives
 - One verse in particular
 - can sometimes be difficult for us to accept
- Gospel of John, ch 6: Christ wraps up His teaching
 - that we must consume His Body & Blood
 - A teaching rejected by many of His disciples

“Hard teaching #1”

- St. Paul speaks of the relationship
 - between husbands & wives within the home
 - These are among Paul’s most misunderstood writings
- Starts off easy enough with the verse:
 - *“Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* (v. 21)
 - Few people find that objectionable
- But then as he begins to expound on that concept in the very next verse:
 - *“Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.”* (v. 22)
 - Let’s just say that, at a minimum
 - that verse can raise a few eyebrows
 - wives glancing over at their husbands to check their reaction...
 - guys leaning over with a smile -- “Listen up honey...”

- And at the other end of the spectrum, some can have
 - shall we say: a “stronger” reaction
 - the rest of the chapter might just as well not even be written
 - because we can’t get past the second verse!
 - Some conclude Paul must’ve been a male chauvinist!
 - If you don’t want to be too judgmental of Paul
 - Write the verse off to simply being
 - a product of the primitive culture in biblical times
 - clearly not as progressive as our culture
 - (and therefore this verse doesn’t really apply to us in the here & now...)
 - If you are tempted in that direction, two quick comments:
 - First - God is timeless – His Word is timeless
 - Alas, this teaching is also timeless
 - But second, the reality is -- far from apparently subjugating women
 - Paul’s writings, taken in whole, properly understood
 - Against the cultural norms of his day
 - Portray husband & wife as
 - partners with equal dignity
- If we read just three vs past the one we sometimes get bogged down on:
 - Husbands are given at *least* as difficult challenge:
 - “*Husbands, love your wives, [no problem there]*
 - *as Christ loved the Church...* [ouch...] (v. 25a)
 - Christ, I remind you (in His own words)
 - “*...came to serve, not to be served*” (Mt 20:28)

- Made that statement in opposition to the Gentile expression of authority
 - Who, Jesus said, “lorded” their authority over them (Mt: 20:25)
 - Jesus didn’t “lord over” anybody
 - Oh, He is our Lord (!)
 - But He expressed His authority thru *service*
 - Service in his everyday words and deeds
 - Service to the point of laying down His life
 - for the very ones who rejected & crucified Him
 - All this begs the question: Who’s serving whom..?
- Let’s take a moment to say what these verses definitely do not mean:
 - Do not imply any *inferiority* of wives
 - much less the *superiority* of husbands
 - Do not imply any “lordship” of husbands over wives
 - as already mentioned
 - Do not imply less value, less importance, less capability, less qualification
 - And it *certainly* does not imply any less Love of God
 - or any other lies Satan may whisper into our ears...

And truly, Satan must get quite a kick out of ...

- Holy Scripture stirring up some hate & discontent
- Holy Scripture: intended to lead us to perfection, to inspire, present ideals that we should strive for...
- Satan, our adversary, knows & understands Scripture
 - Cunning enough to use it in effort to cause sin
 - Recall when Satan tempted Christ in the desert
 - He used Scripture

- Scripture taken out of context
 - Scripture twisted to deceive
- Jesus was able to artfully deflect Satan by quoting Scripture back to him in proper context & meaning
 - But we're not always so artful...
 - When both husbands & wives dangerously misunderstand this passage from Ephesians
 - Can deteriorate to a point where
 - husband holds his Bible shouting "*Wife, submit!*"
 - his wife is screaming, "*You're not the boss of me!*"
 - To say they've missed the whole point of the Scripture would be an understatement to say the least...
- Let's look briefly at the Parable of the Sower
 - (in a way you have perhaps never thought of it before)
 - Can be seen as a beautiful parallel of the husband & wife
 - Sower lovingly sows his seed
 - The fertile ground lovingly receives it
 - New life springs forth in abundance
 - How beautiful
 - unless we get tripped up on Satan's little whispers
 - Who's more important: the sower or the fertile ground..?
 - I want to be the sower...
 - I wish I were the fertile ground
 - We lose sight of the forest for the trees in our way
 - Can't see the beauty of God's design
 - Because we're staring at one verse in isolation
 - rather than the whole in context

- Take a step back. Rise up and admire the big picture!
- Are men & women different? Absolutely!
 - Is that a problem? Absolutely not! It's actually quite beautiful!
 - The husband & wife union is designed to
 - Complete each other – not compete with each other
 - (repeat)
 - Men/Women, Husbands/Wives
 - Have different strengths, gifts, perspectives
 - Let me ask a couple of questions:
 - Who loves their children more? Moms or Dads?
 - Who makes a better parent? Moms or Dads?
 - I hope we're in agreement that, as a general rule,
 - (individual circumstances aside)
 - simply cannot say of a Mother & Father
 - one loves any more or is a better parent than the other
 - Yet there's also no question Moms & Dads
 - tend to *express* Love differently
 - *parent* differently
 - When my sons were young boys
 - Running around the yard playing
 - fall & skin their elbow or knee
 - they'd run to me UNLESS
 - Mom was home
 - They'd run right past me, twice as far if needed, to Karen's ready embrace
 - And it's not that they questioned my love
 - But that it was expressed differently

- Size up the damage
 - Maybe call the dog over to lick the wound for good measure...
 - Offer a word of encouragement
 - Give 'em a swat on the butt sending them back into the fray
 - Even young children know
 - There's somethings special about Mom's embrace
- In these little ways we realize – Men & Women
 - Quite similar, yet quite different
 - We're complementary
 - Together bring balance, wholeness
- I met a guy a number of years ago
 - made a comment expressing some envy he felt of his wife
 - for her being able to bear their child
 - My first reaction: dude, are you crazy?
 - From what I've seen/heard, childbirth hurts (a lot!)
 - But his point was well taken:
 - Is there anything more beautiful in this life than having a child grow within you?
 - bringing a new life into this world...
 - Mothers can try to explain it, Fathers can try to grasp it
 - but the beauty of it is truly beyond words
 - How wrong would it be for man to be jealous
 - why do women get to bring life?
 - what is so special about *them*?
 - Why don't I get to experience that...?
 - How sad... someone else's gift is somehow twisted to be an offense to me...

There is much more we could talk about on this passage

- But suffice it to say: St. Paul presents us with an ideal to strive for
 - A beautiful marital relationship based on
 - the Mystical Body of Christ
 - The hard part is that we as individuals are often
 - less than ideal
 - Guys – we may think we’re “all that,” but let’s face it
 - we’re not exactly the “Second Coming of Christ”
 - Ladies – we love you, but
 - you’re not always the “Blessed Mother” either
 - Two sinners, living in an imperfect world
 - But nonetheless called to strive to reach that ideal:
 - A relationship of:
 - Mutual respect and Love
 - Mutual service
 - Mutual sacrifice

Let’s shift gears here and take a brief look at our

“Hard Teaching # 2” -- Eating & drinking Christ’s Body & Blood

- Today’s Gospel is the culmination of
 - a series of Gospel passages
 - presented to us over the past few weeks
 - Began with the Multiplication of Loaves & Fishes
 - Christ miraculously fed the 5,000
 - With only 5 loaves & 2 fish
 - then incredibly had 12 baskets of leftovers
 - But we go on to see He was not merely revealing His power
 - Over the physical world
 - Setting the stage for: “Bread of Life Discourse”

- where He teaches that even greater than
 - feeding us physically
 - He can feed us spiritually
 - with His Flesh & Blood
- (this in turn was setting the stage for the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper)
- But here in the Bread of Life discourse, Jesus taught
- *“I am the Bread of Life... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you;”* (Jn 6:35a, 53b)
- Raised Southern Baptist
 - Practiced that faith for first 30+ yrs of my life
 - Don’t recall ever hearing a sermon on this passage
 - Why not? This is one of the classic passages on
 - “True presence” of the Body, Blood, Soul & Divinity of Christ in the holy Eucharist
- Answer: it is exceedingly difficult to read John chapter 6
 - with intellectual & spiritual openness
 - and still walk away disbelieving
- 12 times Jesus said he is the bread come down from heaven!
- 4 times Jesus said we must eat His flesh and drink His blood!
- After the crowd’s murmuring and pushback
 - did Jesus seek to quell their shock?
 - did He say “Come on guys, haven’t you ever heard of a metaphor?”
 - No, he doubled down, tripled down, saying:
 - *“My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.”* (Jn 6:55)
 - To the point where in today’s gospel, Jn 6:66
 - Many of His disciples left him...

- Only record we have of any of Christ's followers leaving him for purely doctrinal reasons.
- Our Church history leaves no doubt of the earliest belief in the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist
 - Our Church Fathers – (remind you our early Church fathers & Protestant Church fathers are the same)
 - 1st Century – St. Ignatius of Antioch
 - Disciple of John, writer of today's Gospel
 - Speaking of heretics in the early Church
 - *"They abstained from the Eucharist because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior."*
 - 2nd Century – St. Justin Martyr wrote:
 - *"This food is known among us as the Eucharist. We do not receive these things as common bread and common drink, but as Jesus Christ our Savior being made flesh by the Word of God."*
- There are many other citations I could offer
 - Suffice it to say that for the first 800 years of Church history
 - Hard pressed to find anyone of authority questioning
 - True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist
- Even Martin Luther – the very "Father of Protestantism" (early 1500's)
 - Despite his many shortcomings
 - Strongly believed in the True Presence
 - said it was patently obvious in Scripture
 - citing John 6 and others s.a. 1 Cor 10:16
 - St. Paul says, *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"*

- On the True presence of Christ in the Eucharist
 - Scripture is, Luther said, “...clearer than sunlight and more overpowering than thunder.” (*Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*, 1525; LW, 40, 217)
- I make this point because
 - there is a percentage of Catholics today who do not believe...
 - and sometimes it’s just good for the rest of us who do believe to get a little refresher on the subject...
- Because it can become so routine, that if not careful
 - can find ourselves with a rather blasé attitude about it
 - We almost forget
 - A miracle of God happens at every Mass
 - In just a few minutes
 - simple bread & wine, thru the hands of His priest
 - Become the Body, Blood, Soul & Divinity of our Savior Jesus Christ
 - so that we, though unworthy, may consume Him
 - That Christ may fill our very souls with Himself...
 - For the unbelievers, to say they’re missing out on something truly special is a colossal understatement

Question for us today:

- How do we respond to these sometimes “hard teachings”?
 - Relationship between husbands & wives
 - True presence of Christ in the Eucharist

Respond like

- The many disciples who found it too hard and stopped following Christ?
 - went back to their former ways...

- Like Peter and the other Apostles
 - Had come to believe in the words Christ, the Holy One of God
 - even if they could not yet fully grasp it...
 - They echoed Joshua's proclamation in the first reading
 - *"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* (v. 15)

Hard teachings? Perhaps.

Beautiful teachings? You'd better believe it...