

Reflecting on Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 22, 2021

Introduction: Decision making is difficult, so difficult that bookstore shelves are bursting with management books offering tools on how to make necessary decisions in a timely manner. Some have built an entire career on helping others move through the decision-making process. Yet with all this help, when it comes to making spiritual decisions that have life shaping magnitude there is really very little available, except spiritually reworked secular tools. Perhaps this is so because these life-changing decisions are more a decision of the heart than of the head. After all, how reasonable is it, humanly speaking, to decide to follow Jesus if it is going to require your life? And whether we are called to be actual martyrs or not, Jesus asks nothing less than our life.

On July 17, 1794, sixteen innocent Carmelite nuns were asked to make just such a decision. Instructed by the terrorists of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, to abandon their religious habits and religious calling, they decided not to do so, but to follow their Lord. This unwillingness to abandon their faith and deny their Lord resulted in these nuns being declared enemies of society, arrested, tried, and led to the guillotine to be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness. It is reported that they went to their deaths singing Psalm 117, "Extol Him all you people! For great is His steadfast love toward us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!" Theirs was not a spur of the moment decision but the natural, or rather supernatural, outworking of an earlier decision in their lives to give themselves to Jesus, heart, and soul.

The disciples are faced with a similar decision in this week's Gospel reading. As we have seen in the last two weeks, Jesus confronted those who were following him with just two alternatives; either he is God living among them, Emmanuel, or he isn't; either he is the only means of salvation, or he isn't; either they believe and receive him, as demonstrated by their receiving his flesh and blood, or they totally reject him. Jesus offered no third choice, it was either/or. Do not be deceived, the people knew that acceptance of Jesus in this way meant a total break from the religious norm and that for many it would result in ostracism, persecution, and martyrdom. Though at this time we live in a country where the results of choosing to be Jesus' follower are less severe for most of us, the decision is no less demanding. We do not have a third choice of simply choosing to be a morally good religious person. The decision Jesus calls for is still total identification with him and abandonment to him as our only God, our only means of salvation, and our only source of life. This is a decision which does not simply deal with ideas, but with the outworking of these truths in sacrificial living.

Some foolishly put off making this decision, planning to make this necessary decision later in life. In the meantime, they plan on being their own god, calling the shots in their life, and living as they please. Bishop Sheen tells of just such a man who lived as he wanted, claiming that on his death bed he could cry three magic words, "Lord have mercy!" and be saved in the end. Well, he did get his three last words, but they were different than he supposed, for as his horse threw him over a cliff to his death he was heard to proclaim, "I'll be damned!"¹ This is the hour of decision, as Joshua said, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

"From the outset, conversion is expressed in faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits not hinders God's gift. At the same time, it gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from the 'life according to the flesh' to 'life according to the Spirit,'

(cf Rom. 8:3-13). Conversion means accepting by a personal decision the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.”²

1 *On Being Human*, by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, (page 234).

2 *Mission of the Redeemer*, by Pope John Paul II, (46).

First Reading — Jos 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, summoning their elders, their leaders, their judges, and their officers. When they stood in ranks before God, Joshua addressed all the people: “If it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

But the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD for the service of other gods. For it was the LORD, our God, who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery. He performed those great miracles before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among the peoples through whom we passed. Therefore, we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

1. How do you feel about Joshua’s challenge?

Responsorial Reading — Ps 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21

Second Reading — Eph 5:21-32

Brothers and sisters: Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

2. What does this passage about husbands and wives teach us about relating to Christ?

Gospel Reading — Jn 6:60-69

Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father."

As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

3. What does "a hard saying" refer to?

4. What reasons do you know which would cause a person to draw back from following Jesus?

5. How would you describe this struggle?