

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 34 (33); Ephesians 5:2,25-32; John 6:60-69

Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

John 6:60 When many of Jesus' disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

70 Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." 71 He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

"This teaching is difficult" has of course been the experience of many in the congregation. Often the difficulty lies with the ethical teaching of the Church. However, the focus here is not this or that aspect of Christian doctrine, but the person of Christ and his death on the cross. These are difficult topics. In our experience today as believing community, "many" have walked away from the community of faith, for a variety of reasons, complex and simple. For those who have remained, an inevitable question arises, "Do you also wish to go away?" We should be able to give, at least to ourselves, an account of the hope that is

within us (cf. 1 Pet 3:15).

What have I come to know and believe about Jesus? In the Catholic tradition, we hold to reasonable faith. This is not to say that faith can be fully converted into concepts and logic. However, faith does not invite us to live in two worlds, the reasonable and the religious, but on the contrary to live in one world, with the different dimensions in coherent dialogue. Otherwise, as individuals we are "divided against ourselves" and cannot stand, the very opposite of a holistic, integrating experience of faith. To go back to the Markan version of this scene, the fundamental question remains, "Who do *you* say I am?" It may be some consolation to notice that a dramatic sequence which began with crowds and others evolved in conflict now closes with just Jesus and those who believe in him. A certain sifting has taken place.

KIND OF WRITING

The reader is invited to glance one final time at the chart overleaf, which outlines the sequence of this chapter. As can be seen, we are at the conclusion of the great chapter 6. A kind of summing up and a challenge are both presented. This time, the selection of the verses is quite good—the addition in these notes of the last two verses serves to point us to the cross, just as v. 62 points to the resurrection.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were *ascending and descending on it*. (Gen 28:10-12)

Thought for the day

"Do you also wish to go away" has a very contemporary feel to it, as so many have indeed gone away. It does raise questions: Why am I still here? What still draws me? Our personal response very likely takes some form of "we have come to believe and we know." We should not be afraid to name the experiences which ground our convictions and so make sense of our continued faithfulness.

Prayer

Mysterious God, your Word to us in Christ reaches deeply into the human heart, drawing us towards you. May we never lose heart and continue on the great pilgrimage of the Gospel.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(a) This challenging scene, with the great question and the key response of Peter, is really the Johannine "reception" of scene on the way to Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. (Mark 8:27-30)

(b) *Ascending and descending*

And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God *ascending and descending* upon the Son of Man." (John 1:51)

No one has *ascended* into heaven except the one who *descended* from heaven, the Son of Man. (John 3:13)

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am *ascending* to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17)

Sequence	John	Mark
Multiplication (5000)	6:1-15	6:30-34
Walking on the water	6:16-24	6:45-54
Skip to what follows in Mark after the second multiplication (4000)		
Request for sign	6:25-34	8:11-13
Remarks on the bread	6:35-59	8:14-21
Faith of Peter	6:60-69	8:27-30
Passion theme/ betrayal	6:70-71	8:31-33

(c) Johannine Schism

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. (1 John 2:18-20)

(d) Drawn by the Father

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (John 3:5)

John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. (John 3:27)

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. (John 6:44)

ST PAUL

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:22-25)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 60 Probably reflecting the experience of the Johannine community. On account of the high Christology of the leader, it is likely that a schism took place, as seen in the First Letter of John. The teaching which gives so much trouble is that of the identity, death and resurrection of Jesus. To complain is part of the echo of the Moses theme. Cf. John 6:41, 43, 61; 7:32.

Verse 61 The message here is that if the cross “bothers” you, what about the

resurrection? The Jesus of John’s gospel doesn’t make it easier but harder! A different use of the same word offers consolation at the Last Supper: “*I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling* (scandalised). (John 16:1)

Verse 62 This unfinished and obscure sentence points to the resurrection, but in the language of John 3:11-15. Reference to Jacob is rich. The most obvious references are in the story of the woman at the well, but it is elsewhere. See the texts under NT foreground (b) above, but also: *When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite* (i.e. descendant of Israel/Jacob) *in whom there is no deceit!* (contrary to Jacob, who was full of deceit)” (John 1:47)

Verse 63 Perhaps an echo of the Synoptic saying in Gethsemane—one of the many indicators that we are to think of the end of Jesus’ life in this chapter. However, the words “spirit” and “life” have an extended and profound resonance in the Fourth Gospel.

Verse 64 Likewise, the emotive word “betray” takes us directly to the last days of Jesus. *Believe* is a highly significant verb in this Gospel, occurring no fewer than 98 times. The verb “to betray” is in Greek “to hand over.” In the earlier NT traditions it is God who “hands over” Jesus. In this Gospel, Jesus himself at the end “hands over” the Holy Spirit. So, it can be positive as well as negative.

Verse 65 The mystery of grace and faith—an riddle then as now. Cf. the texts in the under NT Foreground (d)

Verse 66 Not only did “the Jews” walk away, but also some of the disciples. Again, this reflects the later schism in the Johannine community, which appears also in the First Letter (see the NT foreground above). To turn back has an intriguing usage in this Gospel: *When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground.* (John 18:6) *When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.* (John 20:14)

Verse 67 Astonishing freedom in the question! This is John’s version of “Who do you say I am”. It is typically oblique.

Verse 68 The answer of Peter comes in the language of John. This gospel so far has been a quest for the Messiah—John’s disciples, Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman and so forth. Peter voices the experience that the quest has come to rest in Jesus himself. In the light of Synoptic tradition, there is an edge to the confession (Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34).

Verse 69 Notice the plural—this is the credal language of the Johannine community.

Verse 70 The dark side is not shirked, in verses omitted by the lectionary. The language is very strong.

Verse 71 A sad and dramatic note from the editor to the reader, “although one of the twelve”. This is an important indication that the final Passover is also in view.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In this chapter Jesus teaches that the meaning of his life, and the meaning of all human life, lies in being prepared to give of oneself. When have you learned that life was more worthwhile when you were prepared to do that?
2. “This teaching is difficult”, complained his hearers, including some of his own followers. Perhaps at times you also have wondered if you could go along with it. What helped you to overcome your resistance?
3. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life.” In the midst of your doubts perhaps you have held on to belief because, like Peter, Jesus offered you a more hopeful message than you could find anywhere else. How has the gospel message been more attractive to you than any other?
4. “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”. Recall the teachings of Jesus have particularly spoken to you.

PRAYER

In every age, O God, you give your people freedom to walk in faith or turn away.

Grant us grace to remain faithful to your Holy One, whose words are spirit and life, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

This is a great mystery and I am applying it to Christ and the church

Eph 5:21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Eph 5:22 Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. 24 Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Eph 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Irish Liturgical Calendar recommends abbreviating the reading and using the shorter form, vv. 25-32. This is wise pastorally, as no amount of preventative “explanation” will be effective against the offensive wording in vv. 22-24. For the notes here, however, the full reading will be commented.

KIND OF WRITING

The writing here belongs to a well recognised genre, that of the *Household Code*, taking in Eph 5:21-6:9. Household Codes (Luther’s *Haustafel*) usually listed the duties of the members of the household. See as well, Col 3:18-4:1, 1 Tim 2:8-32:13, 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-10, 1 Pet 2:13-3:7, as well as *Didache* 4:9-11, *Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5-7 and *1 Clement* 21:6-9. The Household Code is a borrowing from Hellenistic culture and can be found in Stoic sources and in the Judaism of the time (e.g. Philo of Alexandria). In earliest Christianity, especially in the Pauline churches, women had

much greater freedom than the surrounding culture generally allowed. The Pastorals in general and the Codes in particular represent a later, more conservative reaction, which attempts to limit that freedom in conformity with social expectations. (As such, this would argue for the non-Pauline authorship of these documents, especially in regard to women’s roles.)

Ephesians 5 is a great expansion of the household code, with an allegorical application to the church as a whole. The adjusted use of the Code here illustrates how the peaceful Christian household reflects God’s purpose in bringing all things together under Christ.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Although this reading echoes genuine Pauline writings, it is worth recalling again that in all probability this letter does not come from the Apostle himself. It is also not the clearest piece of writing in the NT—quite hard to know where the emphasis falls really.

RELATED PASSAGES

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. (Colossians 3:18-19)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 21 The opening line establishes the general principle governing *all* that follows. So, *Christians* are to be *subject* to each other. The verb *to be subject to* is not repeated but simply understood in the verse that follows. This verb can also be translated as *submit to* or *be subordinate to*.

Verse 22 This verse, which causes trouble today, reads literally: “wives to your husbands—as to the Lord.” The elided verb is supplied either from the previous verse or from Col 3:18-4:1 (see above where the verb does appear). It could also be inspired by 1 Cor 7:2, which places the couple on a much more equal footing. In any case, the wife is mentioned first because, culturally, she is the subordinate party.

Verses 23-24 The word “head” has been much discussed. It mostly like means “source of authority” rooted in the authority of Christ. This is no absolute authority but subject to the supreme

Christian law of love.

Verse 25 This higher command is directed to the husband as having more authority and thus greater responsibility. Here, the duty of the husband is self-sacrificing love (*agapē*), based on the model of Jesus. This is certainly revolutionary at the time and in that context.

Verse 26-27 Note all the baptismal echoes here. The application to marriage is obscure here at best. Perhaps it refers to the prenuptial bridal bath...

Verse 28 Does this verse set a lower standard of motivation, a more selfish one? Not if we bear in mind v. 31, where the two become one flesh. When the husband loves his wife, he really loves himself, because the two are one.

Verses 29-31 The writing is based on the Old Testament image of the covenant bond with YHWH as a marriage bond. Note the genuinely Pauline imagery of body (1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12).

Verse 32 The mixture of *Household Code* and Christ-body mysticism suddenly finds expression here. The subject matter seems to have shifted and a different light is cast on what went before. Perhaps the writer is exploring the most significant human relationship(s), within the overall Christian vision of social relationship. Both seem to be in mind, because v. 33 lands us squarely back into a real marriage. The overarching vision is Christ’s love, in close dialogue with the cultural expectations of the household. Love and *not* authority is paramount.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Do I see the important relationships in my life in the light of my relationship with the Lord?
2. How do I see the Christian imperative of mutual *submission* working out in my own life?

PRAYER

Faithful God, your love for us all is mirrored in the love of husband and wife. Love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our fulfilment in heaven.

Help to enjoy the gift of human love and may we see therein a participation in the love which moves the life of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods

Josh 24:1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

24:14 *“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.* 15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

24:16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Choice is the theme established by this reading, which prepares us for the Gospel and the choice put before the disciples by Jesus.

KIND OF WRITING

Josh 24:1-28 is really in the form of a speech, which presents a covenant renewal ceremony. It has following steps:

Introduction	(v. 1)
Historical summary	(vv. 2-13)
Joshua and the people	(vv. 14-24)
Renewal ceremony	(vv. 25-28)

The lectionary makes an unfortunate break because vv.2-13 are really God’s words (reported by Joshua) and vv. 14 onwards are Joshua’s challenge to the people in reaction. This is not so clear because the reading skips from v.2

straight through to v.15! V.14 is restored above, in an attempt to make sense of it all.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Joshua continues the narrative of the Israelites after the death of Moses and tells the story of the entry into the promised land. It has the following, much simplified, outline.

- Introductory Speeches (1)
- Conquest (2–12)
- Allotment of Tribal Territories (13–21)
- Concluding Matters (22–24)

Our reading—the covenant at Shechem—comes from the very last section, which deals with the concluding matters in the book (chapters 22-24)

- The Eastern Tribes (22)
- Joshua’s farewell: exhortation and warning (23)
- Joshua’s second farewell: covenant at Shechem (24: 1- 28)
- Death of Joshua and three burial notices (24: 29- 33)

RELATED PASSAGES

Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3–6; Deut 6:20-25 and 26:5-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 This is the setting of the story, which links it with Josh 23: the same four groups of Israelite leaders. It also looks forward to vv. 25-28, as a kind of frame or *inclusio*.

Verse 2 The historical survey (as far as v.13) is really God’s speaking through Joshua. It is a substantial review of the ancestral period, the escape from Egypt and the acquisition of the land. (The Lectionary skips the rest of the speech.)

Verse 15 There are four exchanges between Joshua and the people. The first is vv. 14-15. The fidelity of the family of Joshua serves to indicate the right course of action.

Verse 16 The people’s response is positive evidently.

Verse 17 It is based on history—what they believe God has done for them.

Verse 18 The people allude to the conquest of the land.

The other challenges, not included in the the reading, are as follows:

2. Joshua challenges the people (vv. 19-20) and they respond (v.21).
3. The legal witness to the covenant, make by Joshua and the people (v.22)
4. A final admonition from Joshua (v.24) and a final commitment from the people (v.25).

This reading has been chosen because it sets before us a clear choice and the invitation to fidelity is meant to be grounded in our experience.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Probably as never before, believers are today faced with a real choice of whether to continue as believers or abandon the faith. Have you faced this choice for yourself? What motivates you now, as a disciple?
2. In our story, the people make their choice for the Lord because of all the Lord has done for them. The past can be a bank of experience to sustain in more difficult days. Can you name all the Lord has done for you?
3. A covenant is a ceremony of commitment and every time we have mass the Lord renews his covenant with us. What effect does Mass have on you?

PRAYER

God, always faithful and true, slow to anger and rich in mercy: hear our prayer.

We renew today our commitment to walk the path of disciples, to bring the Gospel into our ordinary lives and to bear witness to Jesus your Son and our saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 34 (33); Ephesians 5:2,25-32; John 6:60-69

READINGS 1 AND 3

The element of choice is what counts. The people hear through Joshua the story of YHWH's relations with them and in their affirmation of commitment, they again recount that history. Hence: "Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." This is very like the learning experience found in the Gospel: "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 34 (33) is now used for the third Sunday in a row as the response to the reading. It is especially appropriate because of John 6.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18

Life is often a matter of choice and so is faith. Today, a stark choice is placed before the chosen people: will they stick with God as they always did or will they just give up? It's a choice we face too.

Second Reading

Ephesians 5:2, 25-32

In the words of the song, "the greatest thing you'll ever learn is to love and be loved in return." There's more to it: any deep experience of love points us to God, who is love pure and simple.

Gospel

John 6:60-69

You will know friends and relations who have given up on the faith, for a variety of reasons. You may also have felt, either in yourself or directly from them, the question in today's Gospel: "Do you also wish to go away?" The answer in the story may help us in our own answer.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

For the first three days of this week, we read from 2 Thessalonians. On account of both style and content, it seems that 2 Thessalonians was written after the circulation of the undisputed letters (hence the similarity with 1 Thessalonians). It was probably not the first pseudepigraphical letter (hence the similarity with Eph-

esians and Colossians). There are three interrelated issues: persecution, eschatology and the "idlers." 2 Thessalonians can best be understood as an attempt to bring Pauline teaching up-to-date, in a new situation and for a later, perhaps second generation, Pauline "church."

Monday 26 August

2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12

A word of appreciation is always welcome! 2 Thessalonians begins with a warm prayer of thanksgiving for the church in Thessalonica and concludes with a prayer for all the believers there.

Matthew 23:13-22

The Jesus of this story is stern, but be careful not to leave it in the past. His teaching is for us today as well.

Tuesday 27 August

St Monica, wife and mother

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 14-17

The context for this reading is excited, perhaps excitable, expectation of the end of time and the second coming of Jesus. The writers dampens these expectations down and closes with a prayer for the Thessalonian Christians.

Matthew 23:23-26

Religions can lose sight of the essentials and focus on the trivial—today, as well as in the past.

Wednesday 28 August

St Augustine, bishop and doctor

2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 16-18

It might seem strange to us, but one of the things the Thessalonians resented about Paul was his refusal to take money from them! In a way, he had insulted them, but he defends his motives with great energy.

Matthew 23:27-32

The attack on "show" religion continues fiercely. It is important to try to hear this both in the present and personally. It is much easier to leave it in the past and think of others. The last line is unexpectedly robust!

Thursday 29 August

Beheading of John the Baptist

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Today we start reading from 1 Corinthians, one of Paul's great letters to his most difficult community. He begins as usual with a word of appreciation in the form of a thanksgiving prayer. As we listen, we may wonder for what would Paul give thanksgiving today?

Mark 6:17-29

The gospel—special for the feast—tells the story of the death of John the Baptist. It is a grisly end for a great prophet, facing death at the whim of his enemy.

(There are some inaccuracies and improbabilities in the Gospel account as well as echoes of the Books of Esther and Judith. The version by Josephus seems closer to the Realpolitik of Herod Antipas, who was not a king. See Jewish Antiquities 18:116–119.)

Friday 30 August

St Fiacre, monk

1 Corinthians 1:17-25

It seems the Corinthians overestimated the value of eloquence and even logic, while neglecting the crucifixion, a paradox at the heart of Christian faith. Paul describes this paradox is very arresting language.

Matthew 25:1-13

Today's parable is a reminder that there are some things which only we can do for ourselves.

Saturday 31 August

St Aidan, bishop and missionary and the Saints of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Paul illustrate the paradox of the cross in the lives of the Corinthians. The "foolishness" of the cross confirmed by the "foolishness" of the Corinthians—a rather high risk strategy of persuasion!

Matthew 25:14-30

Today's parable is undoubtedly severe, especially towards the end. The overall message, however, stands: we have all receive graces and gifts—but how do we use them?