

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Jos 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

READING II Eph 5:21-32

GOSPEL Jn 6:60-69

Joshua 24 is a report of covenant making. He gathers all the tribes of Israel at the ancient sanctuary of Shechem. The purpose of the gathering is to obtain a pledge of loyalty from the people. If one is going to be an Israelite, then one must promise fidelity to the God of Israel. To prompt such unswerving devotion, the author has the people relate the history of The Lord God's love for Israel: Exodus, wandering, conquest. The conclusion must be that there is room for no other god. It is The Lord God, or nothing. To offer allegiance to another god is to maintain that The Lord God is no longer The Lord God. Though the ancestors of Israel worshiped other gods, the Israel of Joshua's time vows abiding service to God and no other. This is the Great Commandment.

Ephesians 5:22-33 contains rules for the household: A list of obligations for the different members of the household. The author takes this pagan creation and applies it to Christian households. The key word in the whole passage is loyalty, which is at the heart of submissiveness. Loyalty connotes standing behind another person with all one's heart. The wife is to be loyal to the husband, supporting him in his roles as husband and father. The model for her loyalty is the Church's loyalty to Christ. In turn, the husband is to be loyal to the wife by loving her. A wife loved is a person fulfilled. The model for his loyalty is Christ's loyalty to the Church, a loyalty expressed in total self-giving. The author rightly cites the language of covenant in Gn 2:24: A man clings to and is loyal to his wife (see Dt 11:22). The result is mutual loyalty.

In John, there are different reactions to Jesus' words: Murmuring, unwillingness to believe, complete loyalty. On one level, some disciples cannot accept that Jesus is the bread come down from heaven. Obviously, they would find it more difficult to accept Jesus' return to the Father. On another level, some disciples object to Jesus' statement that the bread he gives is his flesh. That is, the Eucharist. In any event, on either level, the disciples need grace. On the other hand, the Twelve are a contrast. They vow their loyalty to Jesus. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. They have arrived at faith.

Loyalty is the name of the game. We give our pledged word in marriage yet are tempted to violate it. We sign our pledged word in business contracts yet are prone to disregard it. We promise our pledged word to friends yet are liable to dishonor it. In life, we are exposed to the dangers of forgetting the history of love and the value of others. Yet

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In Joshua, the tribes promise to be loyal to the covenant God. To serve another god is to deny the reality of God in their lives. Indeed, The Lord God is the one who has acted in history on behalf of his people. The only fitting response to God's interventions is loyalty. In Joshua, loyalty is the name of the game.

In Ephesians, the wife is to be loyal to her husband, supporting him in his roles as husband and father. Her model is the Church's loyalty to Christ. In turn, the husband is to be loyal to his wife, loving her and thus fulfilling her. His model is Christ's loyalty to the Church. To be marriage partners means to be covenant partners (Gn 2:24), and to be covenant partners implies loyalty. In Ephesians, loyalty is the name of the game.

In John, there are various reactions to Jesus' words. Two groups are unable to break through to faith. The Twelve, however, acknowledge the person and the words of Jesus. They pledge their loyalty, i.e., they will go to no other. In John, faith implies that Jesus is the instrument of the Father's revelation. Loyalty, therefore, means upholding that conviction at all costs. In John, loyalty is the name of the game.

Husbands and wives, who preserve and deepen their marriage vows, understand loyalty. Businesspersons who honor their pledged word in contracts, know the meaning of loyalty. Friends, who demonstrate their promise of friendship by ongoing concern, realize the demands of loyalty. Leaders, who honor their oath of office by unswerving dedication to the common good, reflect the impact of loyalty. All such people believe that to give one's word means to honor one's word. For them, loyalty is the name of the game.

Eucharist symbolizes the community's allegiance to Christ. By sharing the bread and the wine, the community recommits itself to carrying out the terms of the covenant in daily life. To eat and drink with Christ means to demonstrate loyalty to Christ by loyalty to the community. In Eucharist, loyalty is the name of the game.