Proper 16 Year B – Joshua, 2021

Today we are offered a stark choice. Do we wish to leave Jesus or continue walking with him, even when his ways are challenging or difficult to understand? Do we take the risk – like Joshua?

‘As for me and my household – we will serve the Lord’.

Perhaps the most famous – if not the only – line which people remember from the whole of the Book of Joshua.

Today’s readings are about choosing – make your choice – will you choose the Lord, with Joshua; will you, with Peter, choose Jesus? ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life’.

Joshua is coming towards the end of his life. He has been a faithful and effective successor to Moses; he has led the people of the Exodus into the Promised Land, led their conquest of the people who lived there, and organised the distribution of the land between the Tribes, the twelve tribes of Israel. And as he looks forward, he sees a time when there will be a power vacuum in Israel, resulting in chaos.

Towards the end of his life, Joshua’s predecessor Moses had led the people in a ceremony renewing their commitment to the covenant they had originally made with God. The first covenant, of course, had originally been made with Noah. God said ‘I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you’ a covenant made after the flood, although promised before it. The sign of the covenant was the bow – hung above the earth as a sign of peace – not held in the hand ready for war, as many ancient gods are shown.

The sign of the covenant which the people made with God in front of Moses was blood – dashed on the altar they had erected, and sprinkled upon the people. The people said ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and not be disobedient’. And they made an ark – the Ark of the Covenant – and into it they placed two tablets of stone on which God had written his Law. But of course they were disobedient.

Then, is spite of one failing after another, Joshua calls the people together to renew their commitment to their relationship with God. He recounts to them all the wonderful things that God has done for them (omitted in today’s reading) and then challenges them – ‘NOW, choose this day whom you will serve.’ In other words, Joshua chapter 24 is a story describing a covenant-renewal ceremony, a liturgy of commitment. The people gather, they hear the story of their redemption as Joshua recites the history of the people from Abraham to the present time, they recommit themselves to faithful following, are warned of the consequences of disobedience, and then are sent out to be participants in the covenant. Isn’t that what we do every Sunday?

Here, at the beginning of today’s OT reading, we have the two parties to the covenant – the tribes, the elders, the heads, the judges and the officers of Israel (doesn’t that all sound grand and powerful) – and God! There is no doubt who is the greater. Joshua speaks for God. They are at Shechem, where Abraham built his first altar, and where Jacob bought land for a dwelling. The city is invested with great significance in the minds of the people.

And so, having reviewed all the care God had bestowed on the people from Abraham to the present time, Joshua reminds the people that God gave them the Law, and has called them to worship Him alone. Now, says Joshua, all that is in the past; what are you going to do NOW. Will you put away the gods your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt? ‘As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord’. The people make their promise – ‘We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God’. If we had read a little further, we would have heard Joshua warning the people of the consequences of breaking the covenant, and read of Joshua raising up a large stone as a sign of the commitment of the people to the covenant, just as the rainbow and the Tablets of the Ark had been signs, witnesses, of promises made earlier in their history. Every time someone saw the stone he or she would have remembered the covenant renewed under Joshua – a covenant broken so terribly that the people were eventually defeated and sent into exile as a punishment for not keeping their word. How would they have felt when they read this story in Babylon – deserved everything we got?

But we must not forget that the concept of Covenant – a treaty between God and his people – develops from the very beginning of the OT and continues into the New. The OT scripture speaks specifically of a covenant with Noah, a covenant with Abraham (‘in you, all the nations of the world shall be blessed’, was God’s promise), a covenant with Moses, renewed under Joshua, and then a covenant with David. Jeremiah chapter 31 anticipates a future, new covenant, and Jesus speaks of a new covenant in his blood, established by his death and resurrection. The letter to the Hebrews dwells on this, too.

So today, we too are in a covenant relationship with God, one which fulfils the covenants of the OT.

Joshua told the people to choose – and Jesus invites his followers and listeners to do the same. Here in the synagogue in Capernaum, in the orthodox heart of their faith, he invites the people to think about the bread they had eaten on the hillside and then to compare that to the spiritual food he is offering. John tells us that ‘they found this teaching difficult’ and many of them decide to take the easy route, and walk away. They prefer what John calls ‘flesh’ – which means cowardice and death in Biblical terms – they prefer flesh to Spirit. The price of life in the Spirit is too high to pay.

Today we are faced with the same choice – do we choose life and Spirit, or, like Judas, do we choose to betray the one we say we follow. Following Jesus imposes on us actions and decisions, life-choices, which many find unacceptable. If we are not challenged by injustice, by exploitation, by the mistreatment of those less fortunate than ourselves, those who in the Bible are called orphans and widows, and the strangers in our midst, if the plight of these people, refugees, migrants, trafficked men, women and children, if the plight of these people does not challenge us, compel us to help, then we are not choosing life in the Spirit, we are choosing ‘flesh’.

This is the choice Joshua puts before the people. ‘If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day who you will serve’. Serving God means being in solidarity with God’s chosen ones, the least amongst the people. ‘Choose this day’ Joshua says. ‘Choose this day’ Jesus says, as we gather here to receive that bread of life which he offers. Choose without delay. Choose unambiguously. Let us ask God to give us the courage to respond with Peter ‘To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’. And then we must do our best to accept the consequences of that decision, and if we fail – well, we just have to pick ourselves up, ask for and accept God’s mercy, and try again, and again, and again.