

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTACOST 8-22-21

JOSHUA 24:1-2a 14-18; PSALM 34;15-22 EPHESIANS 6:10-20

JOHN 6:56-69

GOOD MORNING

BOTH TODAY'S GOSPEL READING AND THE PASSAGE FROM JOSHUA PRESENT CHOICES, EITHER TO BELIEVE AND SERVE OR TO LEAVE.

THE READING FROM JOSHUA IS TAKEN FROM THE COVENANT RENEWAL CEREMONY THAT FOLLOWS JOSHUA'S FAREWELL ADDRESS TO ISRAEL. AS THE LEADERS OF ALL THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL ARE GATHERED AT SHECHEM, JOSHUA RECOUNTS THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL, BEGINNING WITH THE CALL OF ABRAHAM; THE LIBERATION OF EGYPT; THE YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS; AND FINALLY THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN UNDER THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP OF JOSHUA HIMSELF. ALL OF THESE EVENTS HAPPENED AS THEY DID BECAUSE THE LORD GOD BLESSED AND PROTECTED ISRAEL.

NOW THEY HAD TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THE GODS THEIR ANCESTORS WORSHIPED AND THE GODS OF THE AMORITIES – IN WHICH LAND THEY NOW LIVED – OR THE LORD GOD OF ISRAEL. THIS IS NOT ABOUT ONE GOD WORSHIP VERSUS MANY GOD WORSHIP, AS THE WORSHIP OF MANY GODS WAS A FACT IN THE ANCIENT WORLD. THIS IS ABOUT THE CHOICE BETWEEN OTHER GODS AND THE GOD OF ISRAEL.

FOR JOSHUA AND HIS HOUSEHOLD THERE IS NO QUESTION – THEY WILL SERVE THE LORD. THIS IS A MATTER NOT ONLY OF INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENT, BUT ALSO OF THE WILL OF THE COMMUNITY; SERVING THE LORD IS A COMMUNAL DECISION. FACED WITH THIS CHALLENGE, THE PEOPLE DECLARE THAT THEY TOO WILL SERVE “THE LORD OUR GOD WHO BROUGHT US AND OUR ANCESTORS UP FROM THE LAND OF EGYPT ... WHO DID THOSE GREAT SIGNS IN OUR SIGHT”.

IN THE VERSES FOLLOWING TODAY’S PASSAGE, JOSHUA REMINDS THE ISRAELITES THAT GOD WILL ACCEPT NO RIVAL. GOD HAD CHOSEN TO BE FAITHFUL TO ISRAEL, AND THIS GIFT OF GOD’S GRACE WAS NOT TO BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED. THIS COVENANT WAS A RECIPROCAL

AGREEMENT THAT INVOLVED GOD'S CHOICE AS WELL AS THAT OF THE PEOPLE. ONCE AGAIN THE PEOPLE REASSERTED THEIR INTENT TO SERVE THE LORD WITH UNDIVIDED HEART AND LOYALTY.

OUR LAST READING IN THIS CYCLE OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS, THE MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY ARE INSTRUCTED TO PUT ON "THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD" IN ORDER TO WITHSTAND THE POWERS OF EVIL ARRAYED AGAINST THEM. IT IS THE STRENGTH OF GOD'S POWER – NOT HUMAN WILLPOWER – THAT WILL OVERCOME THESE COSMIC FORCES AS THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS STAND AND RESIST. THE EXPLICIT MARTIAL IMAGERY USED HERE IS A REMINDER TO THE EPHESIANS OF THE REALITY OF THE BATTLE THEY FACE.

THE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST ARE CALLED TO PERSEVERE IN PRAYER FOR THEMSELVES AND FOR ALL GOD'S PEOPLE, THE AUTHOR OF THE LETTER ASKS FOR BOLDNESS TO PROCLAIM THE "MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL."

IN THIS FINAL READING FROM JOHN'S "BREAD" DISCOURSE, JESUS CONTINUES TO EXPLAIN THE DEEPER MEANING OF THE MIRACLE OF THE FEEDING OF THE MULTITUDE. THE ACTUAL DISCOURSE ENDS IN CHAPTER 6 VERSE 59, WITH VERSES 60-69 RECORDING THE RESPONSE TO THOSE WORDS OF JESUS – BY THOSE WHO COULD NOT ACCEPT HIS TEACHINGS, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO REMAINED FAITHFUL. AS THE PASSAGE BEGINS, JESUS PROCLAIMS "THOSE WHO EAT MY FLESH AND DRINK MY BLOOD ABIDE IN ME, AND I IN THEM." HE GOES ON TO SAY THAT HE IS THE LIVING BREAD THAT CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN, AND WHOEVER EATS THIS BREAD – UNLIKE THE ANCESTORS WHO ATE THE MANNA IN THE DESERT – WILL LIVE FOREVER. WHEN JESUS SPEAKS OF PARTAKING OF HIS FLESH AND BLOOD THIS IS AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN HIS LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION BY BELIEVING IN HIM, AND THUS TAKING HIM INTO OURSELVES. WE HAVE TALKED A LOT ABOUT THE BREAD SO NOW, LETS TALK ABOUT THE BLOOD

I SERIOUSLY DOUBT THAT WHAT JESUS IS SAYING HERE IS AKIN TO THIS: MERELY RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION AND

YOU RECEIVE ETERNAL LIFE. MOSTLY BECAUSE OF THIS PASSAGE, MANY SCHOLARS AND THEOLOGIANS IDENTIFY THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AS THE “MOST EUCHARISTIC” OF THE FOUR GOSPELS. BETWEEN THE BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE AND THE FEEDINGS OF THE MULTITUDES, THERE’S ENOUGH EVIDENCE HERE TO MAKE THEIR CLAIM RING TRUE. HOWEVER, IT IS HELPFUL TO KNOW THAT THERE IS NO STORY OF THE LAST SUPPER IN JOHN. ON THE NIGHT BEFORE JESUS’ DEATH, HE GETS UP FROM THE TABLE TO WASH HIS DISCIPLES FEET. WE MIGHT ASSUME THAT THE TABLE JESUS GOT UP FROM HAD THE REMAINS OF THE LAST SUPPER ON IT, BUT JOHN DOESN’T SAY ANYTHING OF IT. AND, WITH ALL THE EMPHASIS ON FAITH AND BELIEF IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, I HAVE A HARD TIME BELIEVING THAT JESUS IS SAYING THAT PARTICIPATING IN A LITURGICAL ACTION IS THE DOORWAY TO HEAVEN HERE. THE SOURCE OF DISGUST IN JESUS’ LISTENERS IS GOD’S CLEAR PROHIBITION OF CONSUMING BLOOD IN LEVITICUS CHAP 17. AND I THINK THAT LEVITICUS CHAP 17 IS EXACTLY WHAT JESUS WAS GETTING AT, JUST BY A DIFFERENT ROUTE...

LEVITICUS CHAP 17 VERSE 14 SAYS: “FOR THE LIFE OF EVERY CREATURE – ITS BLOOD IS ITS LIFE; THEREFORE I HAVE SAID TO THE PEOPLE OF ISREAL: YOU WILL NOT EAT THE BLOOD OF ANY CREATURE, FOR THE LIFE OF EVERY CREATURE IS ITS BLOOD, WHOEVER EATS IT SHALL BE CUT OFF.” (THE RABBINICAL LAWS OF KOSHER PREPARATION AND EATING!)

BLOOD WASN'T FORBIDDEN TERRITORY FOR BEING DIRTY, BUT FOR BEING HOLY. A GOOD PORTION OF THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS CONCERNS ITSELF WITH WHAT TO DO WITH THE BLOOD AND BODY PARTS OF SACRIFICIAL ANIMALS. WHEN ANIMALS WERE SACRIFICED TO GOD IN THE RITUALS THAT ARE CAREFULLY LAID OUT IN LEVITICUS, VARIOUS PORTIONS OF THE CARCASS WERE GIVEN BACK TO THE PERSON MAKING THE OFFERING, GIVEN TO THE PRIESTS TO CONSUME, OR BURNED ON THE ALTAR AND TOTALLY GIVEN OVER TO GOD.

BUT THE SAME THING ALWAYS HAPPENED WITH THE BLOOD; IT WAS ALWAYS GIVEN TO GOD. USUALLY IT WAS Poured ONTO THE ALTAR DIRECTLY. WHY? BECAUSE GOD

CONSIDERED IT HOLY. THE LIFE FORCE OF THE CREATURE IS ITS BLOOD. BECAUSE GOD IS THE GIVER OF ALL LIFE, LIFE IS HOLY. LIFE IS SACRED. AND IT'S NOT TO BE MISUSED OR MISTREATED – AND CERTAINLY NOT CONSUMED. IT BELONGS TO GOD, AND GOD ALONE.

SO WHEN JESUS SAYS THAT HIS FOLLOWERS ARE TO DRINK HIS BLOOD, WHAT HE'S SAYING IN THE ANCIENT BIBLICAL LANGUAGE OF LEVITICUS IS: TAKE MY LIFE, AND POUR IT INTO YOUR BODIES, YOUR LIVES, YOUR SOULS. AND BY POURING HIS ETERNAL-LIFEBLOOD INTO OUR LIFE, WE THEN ARE THE RECIPIENTS OF ETERNAL LIFE OURSELVES. BECAUSE JESUS' LIFE IS COURSING IN OUR VEINS.

I WANT TO CLOSE WITH THIS:

**MEISTER ECKHART SAID: "THE BODILY FOOD WE TAKE IS CHANGED INTO US, BUT THE SPIRITUAL FOOD WE RECEIVE CHANGES US INTO ITSELF; THEREFORE DIVINE LOVE IS NOT TAKEN INTO US, FOR THAT WOULD MAKE TWO THINGS. BUT DIVINE LOVE TAKES US INTO ITSELF, AND WE ARE ONE WITH IT." WITHOUT BELIEVE WE HAVE/ARE NOTHING AT ALL!
AMEN**