

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 21st SUNDAY (B)

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 15-17, 18b Psalm 34 Ephesians 5:21-32 John 6: 60-69

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Joshua succeeded Moses and has led the tribes of Israel into the Promise Land. We are at the end of the Book of Joshua, and he has called the tribes together to renew their covenant with God. He is their leader, and his style of leadership takes a unique shape. He does not issue orders or put a burden of guilt on his followers. Instead, he reminds them of their ancestors who served God, "... who brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of the state of slavery."

Joshua seems to be saying, "Don't forget what God did for us; stay connected to our God." Then, Joshua makes a decision, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua has made a clear choice; he and his family will serve God. In modern families the father/husband is not the sole head of the household. There are also many single-parent families. Nevertheless, believers who are the heads of families, like Joshua, want their children to "serve the Lord."

Joshua stood before the tribes of Israel; reminded them of the wonderful feats of deliverance and miracles God had performed on their way to the Promise Land. Then he asked them to make a choice. In our gospel today it is Jesus who stands before the descendants of the freed slaves and also invites them to choose. Will they put their faith in him – eat his body, drink his blood – or will they choose another path? Like the Israelites crossing the desert, Jesus hears the people "murmur." Have they, like their ancestors, also forgotten what God has done for them?

This is a good day to pray for all who have responsibilities for the faith development of the younger generation, especially parents and catechists. Parish communities need to offer support to parents and help them model and educate their children in the faith of their "ancestors." Peer communities, discussion and prayer groups, renewal programs, retreats and other parish-based small groups, will offer support to those who have responsibility to form the faith of the young. Let's not forget another thing that Joshua is doing by his decision. His words and actions set an example to his household members. No matter how good the parish – based programs and group meetings are, they are easily canceled, in the eyes of the

young, if they don't see their elders living the faith their words and church attendance profess.

We don't all live out our faith in visible, recognizable church ministries, as do priests, religious, lectors, liturgical planners, etc. The majority of us give witness to our faith among our neighbors and the local community as couples, singles, parents and children. All these places of engagement are important opportunities to witness to our Joshua-like faith, to say in one way or another, "As for me and my household we will serve the Lord."

In the preceding gospel story, the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus fed the crowds "bread from heaven," the new manna. Do they not understand the "sign" they have witnessed? Will they not see in Jesus the daily food that will guide them to the new Promise Land? For many of his own disciples the answer to those questions is, "No." Though he promises his words have life for them – that *he* is life for them – they choose to withdraw and no longer follow him.

Today's gospel catches us by surprise. Usually, Jesus meets resistance from the scribes and Pharisees. But today his own disciples don't accept his words. They can't imagine that what he just said was true – he would ascend "to where he was before." He's telling them his origins are heavenly, and he is going to return to heaven. In a way similar to Joshua's, Jesus is leaving the choice entirely up to them whether or not they would continue to follow him. When they, "... return to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him," Jesus doesn't try to change their minds.

It might not have been so bad if Jesus had just invited his disciples to accept his words interiorly. If he had, they might have been attracted to the person of Jesus, accepting as much of his teachings as seemed "reasonable." They might have felt free to put aside what sounded bizarre to them – like eating his body and drinking his blood. But faith in Jesus is not only an interior assent but also calls for public witness – proclaiming his words to others. So, we have to ask ourselves: do we fully believe what Jesus tells us today – "The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life"? If we do, then we can't keep them to ourselves, our lives must give evidence to our faith.

When we were baptized we were anointed, "priest, prophet, King [Queen]." So, what should our lives look and sound like? There are many very good and

dedicated people of the world who don't believe in Jesus. But our faith requires us to be more than "very good and dedicated" – we must be prophetic. We are called to be missionaries in the world; to proclaim by word and action the radical and total commitment following Jesus requires. Faithful Christians are to have a marked influence on the world they inhabit – that's our prophetic role.

This prophetic role not only belongs to officially designated church witnesses, but to all the laity as well. We are reminded today of the choice that has been placed before us. Again, we have an opportunity to commit ourselves to Jesus and his words of "Spirit and life." If we choose to accept Jesus' words then we also accept their prophetic nature. We have to witness our faith in the many environments we find ourselves in daily life. That witness will sometimes take the nature of words, but most of all it will manifest itself in the choices we make. In other words, our expression of faith cannot be limited to just an hour on Sunday but must be integrated into the rest of our lives. We must profess through words and actions, what Joshua expressed, "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Jesus makes it quite clear that "the flesh is of no avail." In other words, humanity unaided by the gift of faith, cannot comprehend or gain life. As difficult as they are, only the Spirit can enable us to accept Jesus's teachings. Faith in Jesus cannot be achieved the same way we gain other objects we desire. We need grace; but not all who are offered it accept the gift, or are ready to live it, as we see today when some of Jesus' very disciples turn away from him. Living the life Jesus offers will call us to choose our priorities and refocus our goals. That's too much for "flesh" to do on its own. But we can make such drastic, world-contrary choices under the direction of Jesus's words and powered by the Spirit.

Today Jesus turns to us again as we gather to receive his words and eat and drink the food that is his very life. Again, he is asking us to commit ourselves into his hands and say, in the words of Simon Peter, "Master to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run.

"Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Joshua reading:

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, summoning their elders, their leaders, their judges and their officers.

(Joshua said to them all) ...

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Reflection:

Joshua’s words and actions set an example of faith in God for his household. No matter how good the religious education programs in our parish are, they are easily undone if our young don’t see their elders living the faith their words and church attendance profess.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Does my life reflect the faith I express with my words?
- Who were the people in my youth who set a strong example of faith for me?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”. (Joshua 24:15)

WANTED

A few lovers of the Gospel

REQUIREMENTS:

Commitment

Courage

Hunger for conversion and

Community

Over the past number of years, 6 groups of Sacred Heart parishioners have made the “JustFaith Journey”, a process of conversion to the Gospel call, and have found new ways “to serve the Lord”. Below are some words of **JustFaith** “Graduates” describing what the year meant to them.

“**JustFaith** has helped to integrate Catholic social teaching into my life in meaningful and concrete ways. Along the way my own vocation has become much clearer. It's a difficult thing you will learn to love!”

“**JustFaith** provides a respectful place to discuss very difficult issues regarding social justice in this country and around the world. The best part of this learning process is that you are not doing it alone.”

“**JustFaith** demands much from its participants, but it is an experience that is unforgettable and one that will have a positive influence on me for the rest of my life.”

“We are the Kingdom of God. **JustFaith** is a journey into that Kingdom. It offers questions about those who have and those who do not. It asks questions about our

choices, our willingness to share, our capacity to love. And through these questions we are guided by books, videos, conversation, and radical Christian love to consider our own world and how we help bring the “Reign of God” to others. We are called to sadness by the injustice we learn about. We are called to tears by the suffering we begin to see. We are called to hope and love through the strength of community.”

What can I do?

· Consider whether God is inviting you to make the JustFaith journey. If interested, please contact Vince Schneider at 779-9338.

· Pray for those who are considering making the JustFaith “journey” this year. Ask God to help them be open to His call with peace and courage.

[I parishes are not yet offering JustFaith as a way to convert each other to a deeper sense of the Gospel of peace and justice, they might want to think about beginning that program.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Jimmie Lawrence #0597164 (On death row since 12/11/97)
- John Williams #0599379 (3/5/98)
- Danny Frogg #0137368 (3/27/98)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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