

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

August 22, 2021

Joshua 24:1–2a, 15–17, 18b • Ephesians 5:2a, 25–32 • John 6:60–69

I.

Some scenes from the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan this week will endure.

The collapse of the government there,
the end of US military operations after 20 years,
and the chaotic evacuation of Americans and Afghans who helped the war effort
have prompted reflection and strong opinions.

Was the sacrifice of American lives—almost 2,500 soldiers—
and the expenditure of American treasure—more than \$2 trillion—
worth it?

What was accomplished, and what has now been lost?

These are important questions for the American people to decide.

And this is not an emotionally detached debate on an arcane subject.

People have given their lives during the course of our country's involvement there.

Speaking personally,
my own brother—my twin brother—
has been deployed to Afghanistan multiple times.

It's for citizens to determine whether the stated aims
of the project in Afghanistan were accomplished,
and whether they were worth the sacrifice:

1. To keep the United States safe from another terrorist attack following that of September 11, 2001.
2. To rebuild Afghanistan following the rule of an oppressive regime, giving the people there, especially women and girls, opportunities for human development.

II.

In addition to how one answers those civic questions, there is a moral and spiritual question that emerges:

How do I, as an individual person and American citizen, choose to live my life?

Beyond the specific military operation in Afghanistan, the freedom to choose how to live is a cost that other pay.

And the freedom we have to choose how to live is not a freedom that every other person on this planet enjoys.

III.

Today's readings are about an existential choice, a decision about how to live that defines who we are.

In the First Reading, Joshua, the successor to Moses, poses a similar question to the Israelites.

Israel has conquered the promised land—the people of God have spent blood and treasure on that endeavor—which now prompts a moral choice about how to live:

“If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve.”

The Gospel presents the conclusion of the Bread of Life Discourse, which we've been reading during August.

Jesus has spoken in dramatic fashion about his mission:

He is the One sent by God to reveal the Father to the world, and this divine action is “bread”—nourishment—for humanity.

Christ's revelation of God is also the gift of himself on the Cross, which is made present in the Eucharist.

Now, people must decide how to respond to God's gift of Christ.

Unlike the scene in the First Reading,
where the people unanimously declare their support for Joshua,
evidently a sizable group decide to leave Christ:

“Many of Jesus’ disciples who were listening said,
‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’”

And the evangelist tells us that,

“As a result of this,
many of his disciples returned to their former way of life.”

This term is key to understanding Christian and Catholic faith:
It is a way of life.

Being a Catholic is not just an intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal propositions.

Being a Catholic is not just a cultural or demographic association.

Being a Catholic is more than a source of consolation during personal difficulty.

At its core, being a Catholic is committing oneself to live a certain way,
in response to the presence and power of Jesus Christ.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it beautifully:

“We have come to believe in God’s love:
in these words, the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life.
Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea,
but the encounter with an event, a person,
which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”
(Deus caritas est, no. 1).

In the Gospel,
Christ does not backtrack on his teaching.

Instead, he emphasizes that one must rely on God in order follow him:

“Does this shock you?
 What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?
 It is the spirit that gives life,
 while the flesh is of no avail.
 The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.”

Significantly, after hearing dissension and discontent among some of his disciples, Jesus poses a question to the twelve apostles—
 a question he also poses to us:

“Do you also want to leave?”

In other words,
 professing faith in God implies an entire way of life:
 will we follow him or not?

God has created us for himself.

So, how do we want to live in response to that?

We believe that only in Christ can we flourish,
 can we become the men and women we are meant to be.

This is what Peter grasps:

“Master, to whom shall we go?
 You have the words of eternal life.
 We have come to believe and are convinced
 that you are the Holy One of God.”

When we approach the altar to receive Holy Communion at Mass,
 we say “Amen” to the words, “The Body of Christ.”

This word “Amen” is a personal affirmation and a signature: “So be it.”

In other words,
 “This is how I want to live; this is who I want to be.”

It means: “I want to lead a Eucharistic life,
 striving to place God at the forefront, and serving others in all I do.”

IV.

This past Tuesday,
I offered Mass for the repose of the soul of Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo,
the previous bishop of Richmond.

It was the fourth anniversary of his death.

Bp. DiLorenzo ordained me a deacon and a priest,
and was always kind to me and supportive.

I was asked to be a pallbearer at his funeral,
which I consider one of the great honors of my life.

I helped to carry Bp. DiLorenzo's body to the crypt,
which is just beneath the sanctuary.

A few months before he died,
Bp. DiLorenzo came to the parish where I was pastor—St. Benedict's—
to speak to young adults.

The title of the talk I proposed to him was this:
“What I've Learned About God in my 22 Years as a Bishop.”

Bp. DiLorenzo, a very practical man,
spoke about three simple and profound things.

He said that he'd learned three things about God that shaped his life:

1. God loves me.
2. God forgives me.
3. God gives me the strength to do what is hard.

That was a summation of Bp. DiLorenzo's life,
his decision to lead a Christian way of life.

God offers that kind of life.

The response is our choice.