

Homily for the Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
(23rd August 2009)

The gospel reading today, which concludes Jesus teaching about bread in which he calls himself ‘the living bread’ and the first reading, which tells the story of Joshua renewing the covenant between God and the people of Israel at Shechem, are fundamental texts. In each of them the listeners are presented with a particular vision of what the world is like, and then they are asked to decide: will you accept this vision, will you live your life with this as your guiding light, or will you go for something else. These readings are about choices; and it is important to be clear about the nature of these choices. There are some choices which are temporary, and endlessly renewable: today I will take the train to work rather than drive, tomorrow I will make a fresh choice, and the day after that another. Today’s choice affects today, but it doesn’t stop me making a completely new and different choice tomorrow. There are other choices which are more lasting, choices which change the direction of our lives for good: shall I marry this person; shall I emigrate to another country; shall I be a priest. This second kind of choice, once made, affects everything we do in the future; having decided I will marry this person, I am not at liberty to review and remake that choice on succeeding days. It is precisely this second kind of choice that Joshua presents to the Israelites at Shechem: will you follow the God of Moses or some other God – but choose wisely, because once the choice is made it will affect the whole way you live; Jesus asks his friends ‘do you want to go away too?’ – do you want to stay with me, or do you want to live some other way. In a sense they are both questions about loyalty, allegiance: will you give your loyalty to the God of Israel, or to somebody else? Will you give your loyalty to Jesus, or to somebody else?

Challenged in this way, Peter sees something really important. Jesus asks if they want to go away, but Peter sees the decision is not really shall we follow Jesus or shall we not, it is shall we follow Jesus or shall we follow somebody else: ‘to whom shall we go?’ This is important because Peter recognises that all human beings need to have someone to guide them, whether that is a particular individual or a system of beliefs and values. These were the days long before atheism was invented, and they saw things a little more clearly then. Religious questions can never really be put as ‘shall we follow God or not?’; they must, if one is going to be truthful, always be put as ‘shall we follow this God, or shall we follow another?’ To whom shall we go? This is because in our complex lives we are faced with

countless decisions and choices about what we should do, about what is right, about what (and who) we should believe. What do we think about the war in Afghanistan, about the release of the Lockerbie bomber, about euthanasia, about funding for higher education, about tax cuts or tax increases, about tackling swine flu, about organic food and so on, and so on. If I try to research each of these and consider them as separate issues I will never have time to live my life, so I need some short cut to help me come up with an opinion. I could say ‘I will accept whatever the government says’; that would be simple enough, but foolish and irresponsible as it would effectively be making the government and the majority that elect it my guiding principle, my God. Equally unsatisfactory would be the choice to believe whatever the majority of people think. Why should the majority be right? I could say I will accept what this political party, or that political party says, but admirable as politicians are they do not deserve such unswerving loyalty. We cannot afford to make them our Gods.

So, what am I to do? The catholic answer is to look to the wisdom of the church. The church does not, of course, have a complete answer to every question that is thrown at us by modern life, but the church does have a coherent set of principles and values which help us make judgements about what is right and what is wrong, about what we should aim for and what we should avoid. It may not give us ready made answers to all life’s questions, but it gives us the tools to start finding them. In all our dealings with other people, for example, it reminds us that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God; it tells us that sin harms us, and while it may give us pleasure in the short term it damages us in the long run; it tells us that a virtuous life is a beautiful life, and in the end is also a fulfilled life, and that the virtues of faith, hope and love, together with temperance, prudence, justice and courage help us to be fulfilled and authentic human beings. Already we are beginning to build up a picture of the catholic vision of human life, and how it enables us to make everyday decisions. It gives me a glimpse of the values which must be pursued, not just in my own life but also in the life of the nation.

So, if I want to decide what principles will guide my life, what it means to be a human being, I could choose to follow the catholic vision of human existence. But what are the alternatives? In fact, many people simply don’t ask the question. So where do their opinions come from? How do they decide what to think? I was very powerfully struck by a passage in *Caritas in Veritate* where Pope Benedict quotes from Paul VI’s letter

Populorum Progressio: ‘Pope Paul VI noted that “the world is in trouble because of the lack of thinking”’ (*Caritas in Veritate* n. 53). The truth is that many people do not really think very much about important issues. When you ask someone ‘what do you think about our troops being in Afghanistan’ for example, you are much more likely to hear what they feel, their instinctive gut reaction, than the result of their thoughtful consideration. This is because they do not have a coherent set of values, a vision of what human life is all about, to fall back on and use as a yardstick by which to judge the issues of the day.

If I want to come up with some attempt at an intelligent opinion about any of the major issues of the day, I can at least begin from what my faith tells me about the nature of human life. But if you choose to reject that catholic vision of the world, where do you get your opinions? What are the alternatives? To whom shall you go? Instead of a single system of beliefs and values that hangs together because of the fundamental principles that underlie it, you end up with either your own feelings on every different matter, or else you buy into the mish-mash of opinions that are presented to you in the media. The church has spent two thousand years refining a coherent and all-embracing vision of human life. Who else has done that?

The first reading and the gospel both tell the stories of crucial moments of decision in the past. This need to make a decision about what will be the guiding light of our lives is every bit as important today. I believe, absolutely and without a doubt, that the only answer that makes sense is to throw our lot in with Christ, whose vision of human fulfilment is transmitted to us in every generation through the church. Many people choose to reject this idea, just as they did in his own time, but it is important to be clear what they will replace it with. All too often the alternative is whatever I happen to feel at the time, with all the inherent danger that feelings might be distorted by my own desires and wishes; or else it is a cocktail of different ideas that are more or less subtly pushed at us by the newspapers or the television; or it is ideas dreamed up by politicians who of necessity only ever tell us half of what they really think because they need us to vote for them; or it is crackpot ideas that anyone can publish to the world over the internet. So, we must choose. Who will be our Lord? Do we have the humility to throw in our lot with the Church’s vision of human wholeness, or will we go it alone? To whom shall we go?