

COMMENTARY

Coming to Commitment

By Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

A few months ago, a group of sisters gathered at their motherhouse on the feast of St. Joseph, a traditional day of recess from Lent. After a beautiful liturgy, someone remarked, “We forgot to renew our vows on our feast day!” One of the young sisters standing nearby asked wryly, “Are you afraid that our octo and nonagenarians are getting ready to leave the community?”

Hearing the interchange, I recalled that when my parents celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary they were glad for a blessing but said they had pronounced their vows in 1940 once and for all — repetition wouldn’t strengthen their meaning. On the other hand, when my aunt was celebrating her jubilee as a Religious of the Good Shepherd, the sister sharing her pew offered her a copy of the formula to renew her vows to which Aunt Marie replied in a most unsubtle stage whisper, “I have repeated them every morning for 65 years. I know the words!”

In today’s first reading, Joshua gathered his people and called them to make a solemn commitment. They were to proclaim publicly whether or not they wanted to serve the Lord who freed and fed them and brought them to the Holy Land. They swore enthusiastically that they would always serve the Lord their God. We know they kept that commitment as perfectly as we keep ours.

When Jesus finished explaining that he was the bread given for the life of the world, the majority of his disciples came to the conclusion that it was too much for them to accept. Some of them apparently cherished the concept of a more mysterious God who stayed on the heavenly side of creation, a God they could worship from a safe, cultic distance. Others realized that the God Jesus re-presented in his own total self-giving could only be served in imitation of that same love. They found that too costly. John explained their reactions by saying simply, “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life.”

John doesn’t explain how that made Jesus feel. He tells us only that Jesus knew that some disciples lacked faith and that one would betray him. Of course, Jesus told his disciples that they couldn’t come to him without the help of God’s grace, but even with that, did he expect so many to walk off?

John implies that when Jesus looked to see who remained, the crowd had shrunk to a mere twelve. One can only imagine the look on his face and his tone of voice when he asked, “Do you also want to leave?” In all of John’s Gospel, this is probably Jesus’ most vulnerable moment. It was also the natural result of offering himself for others: all he could do was offer, the results depended on their openness to the Father’s gifts.

Peter spoke for his companions and, having learned from the Master, he responded to Jesus’ question with a question of his own: “To whom shall we go?” Picking up on one of the most promising phrases from Jesus’ discourse, he added, “You have the words of eternal life.” Then,

giving words to the process the disciples had been going through, Peter said, “We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

Of course, Peter didn’t fully understand the implications of what he said. Nevertheless, what he said committed him and his companions to continue as Jesus’ disciples with all the unpredictable repercussions that would entail.

We have been contemplating Jesus as the bread of life for five weeks. That’s almost as long as Lent. We have had time to ponder how God has shown us love and care from the time of the first Passover until today. As we reach the end of this immersion into the Gospel of John, the Scriptures invite us to stand with Joshua’s Israelites and Jesus’ disciples as they are asked about their commitment. After remembering so much about God’s goodness, after hearing the promise of life-giving bread and being reminded that the Father draws us to Christ through our deepest human longings, it is time to review our own fundamental allegiance.

Are we ready to renew our deeply personal, public dedication to Christ? If so, we might use the profession of faith as a solemn reaffirmation of our commitment. We could allow the procession at Communion to serve as a communal reenactment of the pledge Joshua called forth from his people. Even making the sign of the cross with full awareness can reinforce our conscious decision to belong to Christ. Most of all, our “amen” to receiving the Eucharist proclaims, as St. Augustine taught, that we are willing to receive what we are and be what we receive.

Jos 24: 1-2a, 15-17, 18b

The scene we are invited to witness in this reading happens toward the end of Joshua’s life. He had already given a farewell speech (Joshua 23), but now he calls the people together to make a public commitment with him as he looks toward his departure from life. The author makes a point of saying that all the people were there, but Joshua singled out the leaders as spokespersons or the most important witnesses to what was to happen.

Our selection skips verses 2b to 15 which summarize God’s saving acts on behalf of this people. Joshua sees the necessity of gathering the people who have finally settled in their land because they were surrounded by groups whose religious traditions were geographically bound; their gods were territorial, therefore when people moved from one area to another they came into the sphere of new gods. Joshua points out that the God of the Israelites is different, their God has accompanied them through various territories, their God has formed them as a people and delivered them from their enemies.

Now the moment had come to pledge their faithfulness or to place their faith in the local gods of the area. Joshua loads the dice when he proclaims his own decision for the God who had brought them this far, but even so, he calls on the people to proclaim their own commitment to the God who has saved them. That they do admirably.

Part of the original point of this reading was the teaching that the God of Israel is not tied to one place and is greater than any rivals. At the same time, it speaks of the religious effect of displacement. When a people leave home and come to a new culture, their familiar props disappear, and they may struggle with language barriers that exacerbate the daily shocks of

learning to deal with an unknown culture. Faithfulness to what has made them who they are becomes a struggle and religion is a key part of that. The Israelites in their new homeland were facing the challenge of discerning if their God or their faith in God could adapt to their new circumstances. In the process of figuring that out, they had to begin to sift through their theology to understand what was truly of God and what belonged to the cultural circumstances they had left behind. The temptations to acquiesce to the new surroundings were strong, but they made their ultimate decision based on their experience of the God who had accompanied them through thick and thin. They were discovering that the God they had known was not just their local god, but the Creator, the God of all.

The church's rationale for using this reading this week has to do with its relationship to today's Gospel. It is an ancient story of making a commitment to the God of life. At the same time, this reading might lead us to reflect on the plight of migrants in our land and the adjustments they must confront. Taken in that light, it challenges local churches in areas that receive migrants to question themselves about how they may have conflated culture and religion thereby falling into the trap of the nations who worshipped territorial gods who were unadaptable to "foreign" cultures. Joshua invited the Israelites to recommit themselves to their God, a God unbound by geography or culture. Today, as globalization makes the diversity of cultures more present to everyone, Christians who want to worship the God of Abraham and Jesus are called to do the same.

Ps 34:2-3, 16-17, 20-21

For the third week in a row, we are praying with Psalm 34 and the familiar refrain, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." Again, we begin with praise of all that God has done for us. In our second strophe, we remember God's care for the lowly. We also sing the comforting truth that evil is a temporary phenomenon. When we say that God destroys remembrance of evildoers, we echo Psalm 2 which declares that evil ends up no more important than the chaff carried off by the wind.

This week, our psalm-prayer finishes with two strophes emphasizing God's care for the lowly and the broken-hearted. The last verse makes the enigmatic promise that although the just may be persecuted, God delivers them. The last line calls to mind Jesus' crucifixion when, in spite of his horrific suffering, not a bone of his was broken.

Eph 5:2a, 25-32

The alternate version of this reading, Ephesians 5:21-32, can rankle and incite teasing or even be used as a faulty defense for patriarchy. The version cited here avoids the most troublesome verses while still presenting the letter's teaching about Christ and the church via the metaphor of family life. This instruction on the responsibilities of different members of the family or household finds echoes in Colossians 3 and many other sources. This sort of instruction became particularly important in Christian communities in which lower ranking members of a household became Christians but were not accompanied by those of higher status. (See Ephesians, Pheme Perkins.) Admonitions that wives, children and servants/slaves be submissive need to be interpreted in light of that context. While the selection does address a particular situation in Christian households, it does so in the light of Christianity's understanding of Christ's love for humanity and the fact that Christians are called to express that same love.

Scripture scholar Rudolf Schnackenburg in *Ephesians: A Commentary* points out that the author is speaking to a community already enflamed by the Spirit of God and that Christ's ongoing love is given to continue to make them holy. The people express that holiness by the way they follow Christ's example of self-gift and love. One of the remarkable teachings Schnackenburg points out in this selection indicates that Christ continues to care for the church "not because she is his Body (or flesh), but because we are members of his Body." He goes on to say "By using 'we' [the author] reminds the readers that they themselves participate in this care."

Schnackenburg adds that this letter does see Christian marriage in light of the relationship between Christ and the church, but that the mystery to which it refers is God's plan of salvation. He notes in passing that the Vulgate translation of the word for mystery as "sacrament" "has played a part in the question of whether marriage is to be regarded as a sacrament." He goes on to explain that the application of the word mystery to Christ and the church cannot be used as evidence of marriage as a sacrament.

This part of the Letter to the Ephesians is much more than a description of the "household code" with all the limitations of the time and culture in which it was written. Its real point is to describe the Christian community's ongoing participation in Christ's self-giving love. It is a "mystery" in the sense that it invites us into ever-deeper contemplation of and participation in God's plan of salvation.

Jn 6:60-69

We are reaching the end of the "Bread of Life Discourse". Our opening line refers back to last week's Gospel in which Jesus called himself the bread which gives life to the world. As we saw, his claims upset people who thought he was blaspheming as well as those who were appropriately awed/frightened by the immensity of what he offered them. The readings from last week left us pondering the meaning of all of that. Now we hear how those who heard Jesus responded.

In this chapter, we have watched the number of disciples diminish. First there were the 5,000 (men) who ate of the bread Jesus received from the child and blessed and broke and shared. Then we hear of an unknown number who sought him, and then enough to fit in a synagogue, and those were arguing among themselves because Jesus' teaching was so difficult to accept.

Jesus knows what is bothering them and meets them head on. If they have been alarmed at the implications of God's coming close to them through him, what will happen when Jesus is lifted up at the ascension? Every bit of what bothers this crowd has to do with God taking flesh as such a humble and vulnerable servant. That scandalizes them because it seems so un-godlike and because it portends a similar future for any who would remain with him.

The "Bread of Life Discourse" we have been hearing for five weeks presents John's theology of the Eucharist — a theology summarized in symbolic action at the Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. In this discourse, Jesus presents himself as God's self-gift for the life of the world. The images of bread and flesh and blood make his message as concrete as possible, indicating that the Word of God became flesh to give life to everyone who would accept it, to anyone who would receive and take in that Word. As we noted, God's self-offering

upends traditional notions of sacrifice and undercuts any self-interested motives for discipleship. Jesus' offer to those who would receive him is nothing less than an invitation to the adventure of unlimited love that leads to unlimited life.

Those disciples who have remained this long with Jesus understand the implications of what he has been teaching well enough to say "This is too hard." Those who are concerned primarily with their own well-being will not be able to stay with him. He's approaching them on the level of the Spirit of God, not the flesh. That is why he says again that no one can come to him unless the Father grants it. Only those who allow themselves to be drawn by grace can accept his counterintuitive, countercultural message.

That was finally enough for many would-be disciples. When they left, Jesus turned to the twelve, the representatives of the new community, and asked, "Do you also want to leave?" Now we see that Peter has learned something from his master. Rather than answer the question Jesus asked, Peter responded that there was no one with whom they would rather be.

Peter's last statement says it all. He says, "We have come to believe..." Although he goes on to add more than he can understand at the moment, that first phrase said enough. They are committed to remain, to abide with him as they continue to come to believe.
