

21ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B CYCLE, AUG 26, 2018,
RENEWAL OF VOWS FOR TOM & BARBARA VALOSIN

1st Reading: Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b [As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord]

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 34 ["Taste and see the goodness of the Lord"]

2nd Reading: Ephesians 5:2a, 25-32 [Live in love, as Christ loved us]

Gospel: John 6:60-69 [To whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.]

♪ We remember how you loved us to your death,
and still we celebrate, for you are with us here.
And we believe that we will see you when you come, in your glory, Lord.
WE REMEMBER, WE CELEBRATE, WE BELIEVE. ♪

Why are we here this morning? Are we here because it's what Catholics do at least once a week? Are we here to fulfill an obligation? Are we here to be with other people who share our faith? Are we here because someone brought us here, or invited us to be here? Why are we here? What are we here to do? Are we here because Tom & Barbara are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary? [I see several pews full of family members]

That is the question Joshua asks the people of Israel. That is the question Jesus asks his disciples. And none of the answers I've just suggested are wrong or bad, but none of them are deep enough to lead to the kind of faith Jesus and Joshua demand. Joshua says, "*as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*" He means that they will follow the God who saved them even to death. Jesus calls Peter and all his disciples to trust him even when we do not totally understand and to follow his way even in the most difficult times.

I think the song is a good expression of why we are here today and what we are here to do. We are here to remember, to celebrate and to believe in the love of the one who gives himself as our food and drink.

The first reading follows a bold pattern of Jewish prayer - one which I have often found powerful and healing. The people **remember** that God brought them out of slavery to freedom, and walked with them through the desert. A good Jew would talk to God like this, "I want to remind you, Lord, that you did it in the past. Now we are in trouble, do it again!" Peter, in the Gospel today, says something similar: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." We remember how you have saved us from our empty lives, we choose to trust you because nothing and no one else can give us what our hearts most deeply need. I suspect that every married couple has had to pray that way more than once, as they faced difficult situations in their marriage & family.

Once we remember, we can **celebrate** what God has done for us, both in the Scriptures, in our history as a Christian people and in our own life journey. As a Catholic community, down through the ages, we have even celebrated what is good in the culture of each age. We continue to do that in our own time - celebrating the unity in diversity of our own country, as well as whatever is good in every culture of the world, - values like justice for all, compassion for those in need, forgiveness & reconciliation, hospitality, cultivation of beauty, freedom of conscience, and scientific research.

But to celebrate the good also means to *challenge* whatever is contrary to the values of Jesus. So the Gospel of Christ challenges physical or sexual abuse by anyone, parent or coach or teacher or priest or bishop or cardinal. The Gospel challenges economic practices & policies which makes a few people very rich while condemning multitudes to starvation, homelessness and bankruptcy. The Spirit of God still challenges any culture which does not respect life & profits from killing and oppression - whether through war or abortion or destruction of the environment.

Today's reading from Ephesians is a good example of how St. Paul both celebrates and challenges *his* culture. He is celebrating the human love between husband and wife, calling it a mystery, a sacrament of how Christ loves us who are the church, & of how God loves all humanity. There is a song that reflects both the mystery of the love of the couple who are celebrating their 50th anniversary of marriage today and of the love of Christ for all of us.

♪ "More than the greatest love the world has known, this is the love I give to you alone ♪... As much as you have loved each other, Jesus sings to us all:
♪ no one else could love you more. ♪

I think that Tom & Barbara have lived that song for 50 years and it's a longer homily than even I have ever preached, but, even more, we can hear Jesus singing it to them and to us. He sings it to us today, through you:



Paul recalls the great commandment - love one another as I have loved you: - when he writes about how husbands should love their wives. However, when he calls husbands to act like Christ toward their wives, he challenges the culture of his time, which considered women to be property at the disposal of their fathers or husbands.

St. Paul's teaching is summed up in the first line of the reading today, "*Live in love, as Christ loved us.*" That is Paul's way of paraphrasing the words of Jesus, "Love one another as I have loved you." And how did Jesus love? He washed the feet of those who became his disciples.

I've heard about a Presbyterian Church in Canada that takes this so seriously that they have incorporated the bride and groom washing each other's feet into the wedding ceremony. I haven't done that yet, but I have urged couples who are going through difficult times to actually wash each other's feet. When I said this at another church, an older man said to me, "Maybe that's like cutting your wife's toenails."

Paul reflects this call to live in love in another verse from the same letter, "*Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" The original Greek has been variously translated as "*Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ, or be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, or be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.*"

The Greek words about women being subject to men reflect the household codes of Paul's time which were as unquestioned as the belief that the sun revolved around the earth or that slavery was a permanent institution.

In another chapter of this letter Paul seems to approve slavery as he writes, "Slaves, obey your human masters with the reverence, the awe and the sincerity you owe to Christ." Some of what he is saying refers to the culture of his time. It was thought then that slavery was an unchangeable part of life. Slavery was part of his culture rather than the teaching of the Holy Spirit. It was something Paul used to teach the deeper truth that in Christ there is neither slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female. In a similar way, he is using the household codes of his time to teach the deeper truth that husbands and wives are equally called to love and respect each other.

When I read that verse with the mind of Christ, I hear him saying, "serve one another, wash each other's feet,"

- I can hear Jesus saying, "as I have done so you must do."



I have put together a free translation of the passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians which reflects how I believe the Spirit of Jesus would communicate the message of St. Paul to 21st century disciples of Christ. It goes like this:

*Brothers and sisters, be kind to one another, tender-hearted,
forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.
Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children,
and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.
Give thanks to God the Father always and for everything
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives, respect and love your husbands as you love and respect the Lord.
Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church.
He gave himself up for her to make her holy,
purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the word,
to present the church to himself in all its beauty, holy and faultless,
without stain or wrinkle or any other imperfection.*

*Husbands and wives should love each other as they do their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself, and she who loves her husband loves herself.
Observe that no one ever hates their own flesh, no, they nourish it and take care of it as
Christ cares for the church - for we are members of his body.
As it says in Scripture, "a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cling to his wife,
and the two shall be made into one."
This is a great mystery; I mean that it refers to Christ and the church.*

[Ephesians 4:32, 5:1-2, 21, 25-32]

To remember God's love and to celebrate that gift are ways to express our **belief** in God and in Christ. We are here to seek and strengthen the values which will bring us lasting joy in this changing world. We are here to express our faith in words and songs and sacramental signs, because, like Peter, we have come to believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

There is a reflection on the theology of celebration which came out of our American Catholic experience after the 2nd Vatican Council which has inspired me. I think these words respond to the questions I began with, Why are we here? What are we here to do?

"We assemble together at Mass in order to speak our faith over again in community and, by speaking it, to renew and deepen it... People in love make signs of love and celebrate their love for the dual purpose of expressing and deepening that love. We too must express in signs our faith in Christ and each other, our love for Christ and each other, or both our faith and our love will die. We need to celebrate."

♪ We remember, we celebrate, we believe! ♪