

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Today we are presented with a profound, disturbing **mystery**.

St John tells us, in today's Gospel passage, that our Lord's teaching about the **Eucharist**, which we have been following over the last few Sundays, was so **difficult**, so **shocking**, that "many of his disciples" simply **refused** to accept it.

As a result, they **stopped following Jesus** and returned to "their former way of life."

Picture the scene.

- A large crowd of people surrounds our Lord in the **synagogue** of Capernaum.
- Many of them witnessed the incredible miracle of the **multiplication of the loaves** just the day before.
- And yet, when he tells them about the **Eucharist**, about his plan to become truly present under the appearances of bread and wine so that his divine life will become our nourishment, they **turn their backs** on him.
- God's **creatures** turn their **backs** on their **Creator**.

We can only imagine how **painful** that was for him.

- And so, he looks at his **closest disciples**, the **Twelve**, the ones he has chosen to become the **foundation stones** of his Church.
- He doesn't offer some kind of **watered-down explanation** of the Eucharist in order to convince them to stick around.
- He simply asks them: "Do you also want to leave?"

It was a **moment of crisis**.

- The Twelve didn't **understand**, rationally speaking, the mysterious doctrine of the Eucharist any more **completely** than everybody else.
- So **why** did they continue to follow the Lord?
- Because they trusted in **him**, in his **person**.
- They put more **faith** in the **person** of Jesus Christ, the Lord, than in their own **limited ability** to understand God.

And that was a **wise thing** to do.

By **consciously exercising** their faith in the midst of that crisis, and not just depending on their own limited, error-prone understanding, they lifted their spiritual maturity to a **whole new level**.

Testing doesn't always come in ways that we **expect**.

We tend to think of difficulties, injustices, struggles, and suffering as the usual **challenges** to our faith.

But sometimes **success and prosperity** can be **equally** challenging.

That's what happened to Joshua and the people of Israel in today's **First Reading**.

- This passage from the Book of Joshua is part of what is known as the **Pact of Shechem**.
- Shechem was **centrally located** in Palestine, and therefore a good **meeting place** for the different tribes.
- It also had **religious** significance.
- **Abraham** had built an altar there, and **Jacob** had bought land there and buried some left-over Mesopotamian idols there.

When Joshua called the tribes together at Shechem, therefore, it was an **important** event.

- It took place at the **end** of Joshua's long and successful **career** as Israel's leader.
- Joshua had taken over after the death of **Moses**, leading the people into the **Promised Land** and then masterminding their **conquest** of that land.
- Under his rule, Israel had experienced political, economic, and cultural **prosperity and success**.

And yet, as he feels death coming on, Joshua considers it **necessary** to call a gathering of all the tribes.

- And at that gathering he **challenges** them to consciously **renew** their commitment to God.
- He knows that **prosperity** can breed **arrogance and laziness**.
- He knows that the **idol worship** of the nations they had conquered, the nations they now inhabit, was still **seductive**.
- He recognizes that if the Israelites are going to **keep their faith** alive and strong in this new chapter of their history, they need to make a **firm, conscious renewal** of their most deeply held convictions.

In **our** lives too, when all is going well and smoothly, we need to make our own **pact of Shechem**, **reaffirming** our commitment to serve **Christ**, not just to seek success and **comfort**.