

THE EMMAUS SERIES

21st Sunday Year B

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18

Ephesians 5:21-32

John 6:60-69

Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life

Today's first reading from Joshua reminds us of the Old Testament framework that has provided the background for the meditation in John's gospel on the Eucharistic mystery. Joshua assembles 'all the tribes of Israel'. Their long journey to the Promised Land has united them; but as they now begin life in their new land they must declare their loyalty to the Lord, who has cared for them despite their constant rebellion and complaints.

Some among 'the followers of Jesus' find the faith he is offering them 'intolerable'. Aware of their 'complaining', he is again insistent, telling them that their faith will be asked to accept far more than this – when his Paschal Mystery is realised (cf. Jn 1: 50, to Nathanael): 'It is the Spirit that gives life', he tells them, recalling his words to Nicodemus, when he told him that we must be 'born from above, from the Spirit' if we are to find faith in him: 'No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man' (cf. Jn 3: 13).

The violent language and the dramatic and tragic outcome of this exchange – 'many of his disciples went away and accompanied him no more' - make it clear to us that this meditation is a response to disputes which are threatening to divide the community which gave us this gospel.

We know from the other gospels that Peter speaks in the name of the disciples of Jesus, in confessing that Jesus is the messiah through whom Israel's hopes will be fulfilled. The hesitation of the waverers is countered finally by Peter's confession. His words have sustained the Church in its Eucharistic life down through the centuries: "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life; you are the Holy One of God".

The Eucharist is the sacrament that makes present and active in our midst the Saviour's Paschal Mystery. In the passage with which we conclude our readings from the letter to the Ephesians we see how central our sacramental sharing in the Paschal Mystery was for the communities cared for by St Paul. (The structure of the family in contemporary society is taken for granted in this exhortation – something which should not distract us from the deep truths expressed in this text.) The Ephesians are urged to live their family life inspired by the unselfish example of Christ. In the 'mystery' realised in Christ's death and resurrection, the Lord has united believers to himself in a union so intimate and personal that it may be compared to the marital union – through this union the Saviour and his Church become 'one body'. He is a loving Bridegroom who cares for his Bride, especially through the great sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist: he 'washes her with a form of words'; and he 'feeds' the Church and sustains it.

John Thornhill sm