

21st Sunday 2015

Introduction: A Moment of Decision

Years ago it was not uncommon for seminarians to begin their studies in high school. We used to call them “lifers” and I am among the last of the lifers. I entered high school seminary at the age of 14 in 1965.

It was quite an adjustment. The seminary was located on a large dairy farm in central Kentucky, about a hundred and fifty miles from where my parents were then living. We lived in pre-civil war buildings and slept on army cots in large dormitories. The spiritual life, the studies, the sports, and the physical labor seemed rigorous.

Actually, I thought I was doing pretty well and was determined to show my parents as much when they came for their first visit, about six to eight weeks after I had entered the seminary. We had a wonderful day together, but when it was time for my parents to depart, all the homesickness I had pent up came out, in spite of myself. My mother, in her gentle way, asked if I wanted to get in the car and go home. With that, my tears dried, I stood up straight, and said, “No, I want to be a priest!” “Well, that’s that,” my Dad said, thereby earning quite a look from my Mom! It was a moment of decision in my young life, the first of many.

Scriptural Moments of Decision

Today’s Scripture readings confront us with moments of decision. Joshua, the successor of Moses, confronts the leaders of Israel. He demands to know whether they will serve the false gods of other peoples or whether they will serve the living and true God. Joshua confronted them because the chosen people were on the brink of destiny. After 40 years in the desert, either they would seek God’s help in securing the Promised Land, or else they would turn away from God and assimilate with the Amorites or other tribes in the region by worshipping their gods.

Joshua made it clear where he stood. He and his household would serve the only true and living God. He would not worship false gods who ask nothing and give nothing. It was a moment of decision. The people of Israel decided to follow the Lord, their God.

The Gospel also relates a crucial moment of decision. As we have seen over the last several Sundays, Jesus taught the people that He is Bread of the Life, not only would He provide them with sound teaching, but above all, He would feed them with His own flesh and blood, as indeed He does in the Eucharist. Jesus refused to compromise His teaching to please His audience, an audience comprised of onlookers, His disciples, and His Apostles. Jesus insisted that His were the words of “Spirit & life” yet people started leaving Him over what would be the core of the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist. And it wasn’t just curious onlookers who left, but indeed His disciples, His followers.

Jesus then asks his Apostles: “Do you also want to leave?” – A moment of decision! Peter, their leader, answers for the rest of the Apostles: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!” Peter does not yet fully understand what it meant to follow the Lord and he too would face further moments of decision. It was only when the Holy Spirit came upon him and his fellow Apostles at Pentecost that he truly understood Jesus’ words of Spirit and life and staked his very existence and his ministry upon them. But for today, Peter’s words, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” are a haunting refrain. Joshua led his people in deciding to serve the true and living God. Peter led the Apostles in following Jesus, the Holy One of God.

Our Moments of Decision

Now the moment of decision belongs to us, to our generation. Will we be committed Catholic Christians of the 21st century or will we simply be assimilated by the culture? That is also the great decision that must be made in each of our lives. No one else can make this decision for us.

What does it mean to be for Christ? What does it mean to follow Him? It means for us what it meant for Peter and the Apostles. When the Holy Spirit came upon them, their minds and hearts were opened. Then they knew that the Lord’s words were “Spirit and life”. Then they truly understood that there was salvation in no one else except the Incarnate Son of God who conquered sin and death by dying and rising, a Savior who loved us so much that He gave himself as our food and drink.

In accepting Christ, we are not merely adopting a new set of rules for our lives, a benign straitjacket in which to go about our daily existence. No! We’re opening our

hearts to the Holy Spirit who transforms us inwardly so that we have the inner freedom to pray as we ought, to live as we ought, indeed, to love as we ought – true freedom for excellence! To love the Father, as Jesus did! To love our neighbor as Jesus did! Those who accept the transforming power of Christ in the Holy Spirit live their lives on a whole new plane, for Spirit gives them the grace, the inner strength, to unite with the whole Church in deciding for Christ, in living as he taught us, and in hoping for eternal life.

Deciding for the Eucharist

These moments of decision for or against Christ occur more often than we may think. They occur in the thousands of little decisions we make in the course of a day but they also occur in the crises we confront and in the life-changing decisions we must make, such as accepting our vocation.

And there is one more moment of decision that occurs every weekend, beginning at 4 PM on Saturday and extending until about 8 PM on Sunday. Will we go to Mass to affirm with the whole Christian community that Christ is the Bread of Life? Will we receive Christ so that He will live in us more deeply in the power of the Spirit? Or, will we let His presence and therefore His teaching fade from our lives? Will we take our place each Sunday at the Eucharistic liturgy? And will we encourage family, friends, and colleagues to do the same? “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life!”