

The Twelfth Sunday of Pentecost

August 27, 2006

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25

Psalms 16 or 34:15-22

Ephesians 5:21-33

John 6:60-69

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let's call this "The Stick and the Carrot."

Joshua has summoned all the tribes of Israel to a meeting at the shrine at Shechem. It is a huge crowd, a happy, festive crowd. They have their "promised land." Now it's time for a decision, time for a commitment.

After all those years wandering around the desert living on manna and quail, meeting all sorts of strange people and their strange gods, here they are, just as their God had promised. That's quite an accomplishment.

God deserves a thank you, doesn't He?

However, being as human as we are, and with our short attention span, and our amazing ability to think that we can take care of ourselves, the people of Israel sort of say, "So much for that" and go off after other gods, all those gods they had heard about in their journey, gods of the local Canaanites.

Does that make sense? Of course not, but it happened. And Joshua says, "Choose – now! Our God or theirs. Choose correctly and live

your lives in this promised land; choose incorrectly and you will have nothing. There is no compromise, no half-way faith. Our God or nothing.”

Amazing, isn't it? That scene is repeated again and again and again. We, humanity, have an amazing capacity for creating and worshipping other gods. We don't think of them as gods, but they are. They have lots of names: money, power, security, personal fulfillment, self-actualization. They become our gods when we raise them to such a level of importance that they run our lives, our decisions, our priorities.

We give those things immense credit – credit for our happiness, our success, our well-being – just like those comfortable ancient Israelites.

Jump forward a few centuries to a little band of disciples and Jesus. Those disciples are as human as we are. What false gods do you suppose they have at the moment of our Gospel? They did have them, you know. Perhaps self-preservation. That comes to mind. Jesus is becoming a challenge, saying difficult things. It's not safe to be near him. Those who have trooped after Him, thinking they were on the way to their very own promised land, whatever that might mean for them, are falling away. It is much safer to worship their own gods.

Of course there is pressure in being with Jesus. And they, and we, have a driving need to be accepted, to be on the “right” side and never to be laughed at.

There are a few who see through the false gods, a few who remain constant. A few who can honestly say, “Where can we go? You have the words of life.” A few know that there is no other choice.

Sooner or later we are all called to make that commitment, that choice. How do we choose? Do we, like those Israelites, choose to

follow God because, as Joshua says, “He is a jealous God” and, if you don’t, He will do you grievous harm? That’s the stick.

Or do we choose the carrot, rather the bread, the “living bread” come down from Heaven, the gift of eternal life?

In His Holy Name.