

Title: Hard Choices to Make

Subtitle: When Realism Clashes with Idealism in the Christian Life.

Video URL: https://youtu.be/xiN_7aqWCOc

At the height of a certain romance, the woman said to the guy, “I’m sorry, George, but I’ve decided that I don’t want to become engaged. I can’t marry you.” To which George replied, “*You want to leave me now? Is there someone else?*” The woman sighed and said soulfully, “*Oh, George, there must be.*”

In today’s gospel lesson, the apostle John tells us that many of those in the crowds who had been tingling with excitement when they first met Jesus now were complaining about the things he was saying and were leaving Him. The romance was over. We can almost hear them saying, “There must be someone else.” At this point, Jesus says to the twelve apostles, “***What about you? Do you want to leave me too?***”¹ And Simon Peter answers, “***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God.***”²

Jesus explained that the crowds “***only followed him because (they) ate their fill of loaves.***”³ Then, they quickly became disillusioned when he didn’t do what they wanted or expected. Like the old 1960s song by Frank Sinatra, they had “High Hopes,” but “the high apple pie in the sky” idealistic kind of hope was unrealistic and set them up for disappointment.

This episode is not the only place in scripture where people became disillusioned with God and began looking for an easier path. All the readings assigned today reflect this theme and leave us with a choice. For example, Joshua charges the people in our

¹ John 6:67

² John 6:68

³ John 6:26

Old Testament lesson to ***“choose this day whom you will serve,”***⁴ and he does so by listing all the other options available to them. The God we serve gives us the liberty to make up our minds and make a choice. Earlier in our Gospel, Jesus said, ***“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”***⁵ This statement means that we are drawn, not driven, to make up our own minds. We are drawn because the bread of God came down from heaven to give life to the world. That bread is given to us because ***“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”***⁶ Therefore, it is love that draws us into a state of grace where faith freely flourishes.

I find it very interesting that many restaurants that fill up with church people every Sunday afternoon offer a Sunday buffet. Is this a mere coincidence? Probably. But it provides a powerful metaphor or icon of American religion. We have come to see religious belief as a theological smorgasbord. We feel it is our prerogative, even our right, to decide what we want to believe. While it is true that the Church does not want to lord it over people’s faith, the Church has a responsibility to pass on to the next generation ***“The Faith as it was once for all delivered to the saints.”***⁷ That Faith is based on a person who came from heaven to give his life for the life of the world. He is the bread of life, the basic, essential ingredient that nourishes the life and Faith of the Church. Therefore, the Church has one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all. Admittedly, this may seem too exclusive and narrow for some to swallow.

When Jesus gave us *The Bread of Life Discourse*, he did so from a heavenly and spiritual point of view. He explained, ***“The***

⁴ Joshua 24:15

⁵ John 6:44

⁶ John 3:16

⁷ Jude 1:3

words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.⁸ The human way of reasoning, which is limited by what a person sees and feels, cannot help a person understand these things. His words were so challenging that even ***“his disciples were complaining about it.”***⁹ So Jesus asks them, ***“Does this offend you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?”***¹⁰

Later, the Apostle Paul would refer to the teachings of Christ as wisdom, not of this age, but as ***“a secret and hidden wisdom of God,”***¹¹ which is ***“revealed to us through the Spirit.”***¹² ***“For we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.”***¹³

Therefore, when you come to the Episcopal Church, we do not ask you to leave your brains at the door. We have to use our minds to study and wrestle with what the Bible says. We need to make sure that we are not just following the latest fad or popular teaching blowing through the Church, which is so often out of balance.

So, where does this leave us? Shall we cast in our lot with the people of this world? Shall we smother our fears, misgivings, doubts, aspirations, and hopes just because there are hard things in the scriptures to understand? And thus, by our negligence, quench the divine light in us?

As Peter saw it, the alternative was the necessity of faithfully following Christ. Where but in Christ do we find a God who loves us even when we have gone astray? And where do we find a God who loves us even when our perceptions of spiritual realities are

⁸ John 6:63

⁹ John 6:61

¹⁰ John 6:62

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 2:6

¹² 1 Corinthians 2:10

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:12

vague and filled with honest questions? Thankfully, when those questions arise, we have someone *“to whom we can go.”*¹⁴

Confronting those questions will stretch you. In our New Testament lesson today, Paul calls us to *“be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.”*¹⁵ Previously, in that letter, Paul had opened to them the bright secrets of grace: the mystery of their election—with the wonders of their salvation and spiritual resurrection. But now, he seems to give them a reality check. Namely, that life on this side of heaven has no demilitarized zone. He explains these spiritual realities in a way that a materialistic age outright rejects. Therefore, we have choices to make. Will we accept the teachings of the apostles and prophets who have faithfully followed Christ, or will we follow the philosophies and elemental principles of the world that reject these things?

These are not easy decisions. But let me remind you that in our Baptismal Covenant, you were asked, “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world that *corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?*”¹⁶ If such words are used in a believer’s initiation into the Christian life, then the reality of *“Satan and all the forces of wickedness that rebel against God”*¹⁷ is something that we need to take seriously.

Thankfully, we have been given all we need to contend with the adversary of our soul by choosing to **“put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”**¹⁸

Time does not permit me to go into all the details of a Christian’s armor with its Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of

¹⁴ John 6:68a

¹⁵ Ephesians 6:10

¹⁶ Book of Common Prayer, The Presentation and Examination of Baptismal Candidates, p. 302

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ephesians 6:11

Righteousness, the Shoes fitted with the Gospel of Peace, the Helmet of Salvation, the Shield of Faith, and the Sword of the Spirit. These are metaphors for putting on truth, righteousness, faith, and all God has for us as we firmly stand our ground.

So, let's take these lessons from scripture to heart and do all we can to feed on the bread of life that gives us the strength to follow him "with God's help" as our Baptismal Covenant bids us.

Amen