

TWO GROUPS OF PEOPLE

Joshua 24. 1-2a, 14-18

Ephesians 6. 10-20

John 6. 56-69

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

You know, God does not force himself upon us. He gives us the freedom to choose whether we want to serve him or not. He gives himself to us in love, and we can choose whether to return that love, or to ignore him. Some definitely choose to ignore or go against God; and others ignore him by default – that is, they let other things and other people squeeze God out. If we are to love and serve God, we have to be sure that we make this a conscientious choice.

Joshua called the tribes of Israel together and asked them to dedicate their lives to the true God. If they were unwilling to serve the Lord, he told them that they should at least choose whom they were going to serve, whether it was the gods of Egypt or the gods of the Amorites. There is always the danger of not making a clear choice. Fortunately, Joshua gave the Israelites a lead by saying, ‘As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’

Once they were given a lead, the tribes of Israel declared that they would not desert the Lord and follow other gods. They then recited how the Lord delivered them from Egypt and from slavery: the Lord had accomplished great wonders in their sight, and the Lord had protected them. ‘Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’ The Israelites made a definite decision to serve the Lord.

In our reading from St John’s Gospel, we find that there are two groups of people. Those who find our Lord’s teaching too hard, who take offence and who do not

behave, belong to the first group. They turn away from Jesus and no longer go with him. There are many who do this.

The second group are those who seek to stay with our Lord and to be loyal to him. Amongst the members of that group are Jesus' twelve disciples. Yet in spite of this, Jesus asks them, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Our Lord does not force them to stay; if they want to, they can leave; and Judas will later prove the possibility of this. It is Simon Peter who replies for the other disciples by saying, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

All of us are given the opportunity of turning away from Christ or committing ourselves to follow him. And this is not just a one-off choice; we are called to make it every day, and sometimes many times in a day.

Those of you who are as old as I am may remember a famous song that was released by singer Bob Dylan in the seventies, called 'Gotta Serve Somebody'. I'm not a particular fan of Dylan, but the words of this song impressed me by the way they made their point. As the song opens, Bob sings:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you may like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.¹*

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The point Dylan is making is that whether we are powerful or not, whatever our likes or hobbies may be, whether we are famous or unknown, whether we be rich or poor, we'll all end up serving someone (or something). And the big question is, 'Who, or what is it going to be?'

If we take a moment to think about it, we'll realise that it is impossible to *fundamentally and meaningfully* serve a number of different causes, things or people at the same time. It is difficult to divide our loyalties and serve one thing 50%, another 30%, and another 20%. Like it or not, we all make choices. We have to make up our minds.

When he spoke to people about wholehearted Christian commitment, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard liked to tell the following story. Once upon a time there was a fire in a small town. The fire brigade rushed to the scene, but the fireman were unable to get through to the burning building. The problem was the crowd of people who had gathered not to watch, but to help put out the fire. They all knew the fire chief well – their children had climbed over his fire engines during excursions to the fire station, and the friendliness of the fire chief was legendary. So when a fire broke out, the people rushed out to help their beloved fire chief.

Unfortunately the townsfolk were seeking to extinguish this raging inferno with water pistols! They all were standing there in front of the fire, squirting their pistols into the fire while making casual conversation.

The fire chief couldn't contain himself. He started yelling at the townsfolk. 'What do you think you're doing? What on earth do you think you're going to achieve with those water pistols?!'

The people realised the urgency of the situation; and they still wanted to help the fire chief. So they started squirting more. ‘Come on’, they encouraged each other, ‘We can all do better, can’t we?’ Squirt, squirt, squirt, squirt.

Exasperated, the fire chief yelled again. ‘Get out of here. You’re achieving nothing except hindering us from doing what needs to be done. We need firemen who are ready to give everything they’ve got to put out this fire; people willing even to lay their lives on the line. This is not the place for *token contributions*.’

Today and at other times this week, may you and I echo the commitment of St Peter who said, speaking for himself and *for us*, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

Amen.