

### **Joshua 24, John 6:60ff “As for me and my house”**

I confess to being a Guardian reader. It's an infuriating thing to be, particularly for a Christian, but some habits are hard to break. I was rather surprised, the other day, to see that one of the leader columns was a panegyric on the great Puritan writer John Bunyan. I suspect had the journalist concerned known a little more about seventeenth century Calvinism, he or she might have made more of the seeming strangeness of trumpeting Bunyan in the pages of the Guardian, but it wasn't that which took my eye, so much as the acknowledgement of Bunyan's having enriched our tongue with his style and language. Examples were offered of well known phrases which we owe to him, two of which were quite reasonably “slough of despond”, and “Vanity Fair”, but unfortunately, he was also credited with the words “straight and narrow”. Presumably this leader writer thought that Bunyan had influenced the author of Matthew's gospel, if not our Lord himself.

Today's Old Testament reading contains a resonant Biblical phrase: “As for me and my house”. It's an expression sometimes used as a synonym for “in my opinion”, and it reminds us of the enormity of certain of the choices which God invites us to make. The history of the Old Testament might be summarised in a question and an answer: the question being “Who is God”, and the answer being “The Lord is God”, and the Lord, remember, is the traditional rendering of the name of the God of Israel,

Jehovah or, more properly, Yahweh. Here, Joshua is speaking to his victorious followers. Yahweh, the Lord, has led them to the promised land, the land which his servant Moses was allowed to survey but not to enter. Taking possession of that land has involved conflict and conquest, the destruction of the walls of Jericho being the best known example. Canaanites peoples and the kings have been swept aside as the Lord has fought for his chosen few, and now that which was promised has come to fruition.

It is a time of crisis, literally, a time of judgement. This people began life beyond the Euphrates, and before the Lord made his covenant with Abraham, theirs were strange gods, now left far behind. Yahweh has brought them out of Egypt into this new place of settlement, and it is time for a decision. When they settle, do they integrate themselves as fully as possible with the land of Canaan, do they take, as well as the land, its produce, its livestock, its cities and towns and villages, do they take its gods? Such syncretism would surely be the easiest way of settling among a conquered people. Or do they introduce to this new land, their own God, Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, the God who brought them from Egypt to Sinai and now to this place. Joshua does what a leader ought: he provides an example. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”.

When we read the Old Testament we must remind ourselves that these are very ancient tales. That is not to diminish their importance, merely to understand them better. They might be compared to the epic stories we find in Homer, which tell perhaps of events more than three thousand years ago, and which were composed as songs or sagas hundreds of years later. Closer to our own time, one can trace the development of stories such as those of King Arthur and his Knights, watching them develop from differing sources over several centuries. I am not suggesting that the Book of Joshua is a-historical, that it tells nothing of the past. But the past of which it tells is dim and distant, told and retold in poem and song from father to son, until eventually - and again over many centuries - being written down by those who wished to use the past to speak to present and of the future.

The hindsight with which our Hebrew scriptures were written can sometimes seem to present a rather rosy view of Israel's faith in the one God who made the heavens and the earth. In fact, as Joshua makes clear, there were plenty of competing gods around. The people of Israel a thousand and more years before Christ would not have doubted that more gods than their own actually existed - our notion of monotheism would have seemed rather strange to them - but they would have made their own choices as to which god or gods were going to be theirs. The fact that other gods were still around - they were often lumped together as one group by the word Baals - is clear from the later stories we read

of apostatising Kings and prophets who call the people back to the one God who is truly theirs.

Choice is a characteristic of our society. The orthodoxy of choice being a good thing is now rarely challenged. We do not, of course, have to choose between differing gods. What for an ancient Israelite would have been ridiculous - the notion that there is in fact no God at all - is for us a commonplace. If we choose to believe in any god in the first place we are making something of a bold step, or at least I get that impression when I choose to read the Guardian. But we shouldn't be self congratulatory about our choice to believe. Rather, we ought to ask ourselves whether, having made that choice, we choose to follow it through. For the followers of Joshua, the decision to serve the Lord formed the basis of a national life and history. For those who have listened to Jesus offending his hearers with mysterious talk of earth meeting heaven and inheriting eternal life, a similar decision was necessary: what about you, are you going to go as well? Again it is a leader, not Joshua but Peter, who utters the response of every Christian - "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life".

In both cases, we see a life choice. Not the casual option of voting for someone, or choosing which team to follow in a cup final, but a decision which affects everything about the person who makes it. What does that decision mean for us? Look around yourself, at your families, friends

and neighbours. Look in particular at those who are not Christians, and ask yourself what makes you different? What does serving the Lord really mean? Start with the simple things. In your home, where is your Bible? How often do you read it? When do you say your prayers? How much priority do such things take in your lives?

When decisions have to be made, how do you make them? Do you ask yourself what the loving choice would be, the Christ like choice? When relationships are formed and strengthened, is Christ a part of these? Do you speak of your faith, do you share it with others subtly or boldly, do you give of your time and your talent and your energy to God. Do you come to church because you do do all these things, or as is common for us all, do you come to church knowing that you don't, but knowing also that you'd like to do better.

Prayer and worship are the beginning of service. The call to follow is a high call, a life choice, something as far from casual as it can possibly be. So it is that here and together, day by day and week by week, we are enabled to begin again. In saying Amen to the Body and Blood of Christ, we can truly say and truly mean "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."