

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY (B)

August 23, 2009
Church of St. Luke, Clearwater

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

Readings: Joshua 24:1-2, 15-17, 18
Ephesians 5:21-31
John 6:60-69

The Scripture readings speak to us today about defining moments of character and identity.

In the first chapter of Joshua, the tribes of Israel had yet to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. But in this final chapter from which we read today, their situation is quite different. They have vanquished their enemies and settled into the land. But Joshua is uneasy. He wonders if the victory truly has been won within the hearts of his people. As they get comfortable in their new surroundings, they begin to forget about their exodus experience from Egypt and the miraculous ways in which God had brought them through the desert. Joshua decides to gather the tribes together at Shechem for a defining moment. He gives the people an ultimatum: either serve the God of their ancestors or follow the pagan gods of the Amorites. He then tells them that he and his family will serve the Lord their God. Subsequently, the chosen people join Joshua and his family in admitting in their response that the Lord is the only true God.

Jesus, as we have heard these past three weeks, has had trouble convincing the crowds that he is the new manna sent down from Heaven. In today's Gospel account, however, it is his own disciples who show resistance to his message. Again, in a defining and pivotal moment, Jesus confronts the apostles' hesitation with a direct question: "What about you? Will you leave as well?"

Their response is also a defining one: "To whom would we go? We have come to believe that you are God's holy one."

And yes, even that controversial second reading, contains such a defining truth. For once, we get beyond the very real cultural inequalities of his time, we see that St. Paul is ultimately saying that all Christian men and women must defer or be submissive to one another for the Lord's sake. He logically reasons that you cannot have a happy marriage or unified church if one party insists on his or her own way. If we love one another, we must defer to one another out of reverence and respect.

My dear friends, it is said that we live in a post-Christian era. It is said that we live in a day when secular values regularly trump religious truth and where political correctness, not the truth, carries most arguments or wins most elections.

One defining moment for this country was certainly the Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, that on January 22, 1973, declared that babies in their mothers' wombs had no inalienable right to be born. This was a tragic decision that deprived one segment of our society of the God-given right to life. And I firmly believe that the violence that has been inflicted on a significant part of our unseen population has now spilled over into more violent and criminal sectors of our society. Unfortunately, we are reaping the destruction and dysfunction we have sowed.

A second defining moment would have to be September 11, 2001, the so-called 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York City, a day that also included other horrific tragedies. This was an eye-opening experience for most Americans who realized in that moment how fragile their physical security really was. The culture of Western capitalism was suddenly and violently confronted by the culture of terrorism and anarchism. The result has been two long wars in the Middle East and accommodation here at home to the requirements of higher security and the reality of constant apprehension.

I think it can also be said that we are even now living through another defining moment as the debate takes place in Congress over a national healthcare plan. Yes, everyone agrees that the system needs attention, but the opportunity for correction has opened a Pandora's Box of potential dangers to the dignity of the human person. Do we want our tax dollars to pay for the abortion of babies in the womb? Until now, there has always been a restriction on federal monies supporting the abortion of children. Can we live with the consequences of having your tax dollar and mine pay for the killing of children in the womb?

Do we agree that after a certain age, let's say 80 years, that the rationing of healthcare services will be cut off to a person who has cancer or is suffering from Alzheimer's disease? Such rationing of resources will inevitably give rise to euthanasia. Do we want the government to decide what medical insurance we can have or, for that matter, what medical procedures will be permitted to be paid out of pocket? There is much at stake in all of this. These are truly monumental decisions and pose to us a defining moment not only in terms of policies and law, but address the very definition of who we are as a nation and what moral values will characterize us as a people as we move forward.

My brothers and sisters, our faith cannot be regulated to the internal walls of this church, but must be engaged in pursuing the common good of the society in which we live. Yes, we must attend to the needs of the poor, the homeless, the stranger, the sick among us. But we must also be actively involved in the community, seeking the common good for all of our fellow citizens.

As Catholics and faithful followers of Jesus, we bring to the public forum the same determination of which Joshua spoke, the same reasoned, though at times misunderstood,

principles which St. Paul proposed and the same unwavering faith in Jesus of which his disciples speak in today's Gospel.

And in all of these defining moments, the one constant source of strength and nourishment for us is found in this Holy Eucharist that we celebrate today. Here, we are given the manna that comes down from Heaven in the very Body and Blood of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. He gives himself to us in the Eucharist so that we might become more like him in order to carry on his mission here on earth.

As we come forward to receive this Holy Eucharist today, let us be aware that this, too, can be a defining moment for our lives. And let us go forth this week resolved that we can make a difference in the society in which we live and with the people whom we will meet.