



When God created Adam and Eve, of course, He created them with free will. In Genesis is described, as you remember, the tree which God puts in the middle of the garden, and that Adam and Eve were told they can eat from all the other trees in the garden. However, from that center tree they are not to eat, lest they die.

So we see that Adam and Eve had a choice: Obey God and trust His word – or – disobey God and do not trust His word.

We see in this human free will. After the fact that we exist at all, free will is God's greatest gift to us. Why did God give us this gift? Wouldn't it be easier for every one if we didn't have free will? There would be no sin!

So, why did God give this to us? He gave it to us because without free will, there would be no love. If you don't have the choice not to love, then you don't really have the choice to love. Love is a free gift of one's self. Without free will, Adam and Eve (and all of us) would just be God's puppets. God rather wanted us to have the power to love Him freely, to choose to give ourselves to Him. He took the chance that we would say no to Him.

What does this have to do with today's readings? Well, in the first reading we see that Joshua has made his decision. All of the Israelites here are confronted with a choice: follow the true God or follow the false gods. Now, to us looking at it from the outside, this seems like an easy choice: what's the big deal?

But the Israelites were surrounded by other peoples. They lived among other peoples who followed and worshipped false gods. It was a great temptation for the Israelites (and for all of us) just to get along, not to make waves, to take the easier path, not to stick out. This is the real temptation that Israelites face. They could take all the gods of the pagans as their own, they could just blend in, just get along or they could follow the true God. Joshua made his choice: "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." His choice was to love and to trust God.

If we really look at our lives, we are faced with this decision all the time. In our vocations we have to choose every day to be faithful, not to go the easy way out. To struggle through the difficulties of married life trusting in the Lord. To struggle through the difficulties of priesthood or religious life trusting in the Lord. To struggle through the difficulties of raising children trusting in the Lord. When we attend to our vocation with diligence and perseverance, we are saying with our lives, "We will serve the Lord" and in that is love: it is the choice to love God.

Or in our jobs or activities, when we know something is wrong, not to fall into the temptation of just getting along or turning our heads the other way. But when we choose what is right and seek to correct what is wrong – not in an arrogant way, but always with humility – when we seek to be a light for the world, we are choosing the Lord, we are choosing to love Him.

Even regarding the truths of our faith, we have to make a choice – to believe or not to believe. In the Gospel reading today, Jesus' hearers were confronted with this choice concerning the Eucharist. We have been hearing Jesus say over the past few weeks, "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." Those who heard Him had a decision to make – believe Jesus or not to believe Him. We see in the Gospel today that many made the choice not to believe. These were disciples – not the 12 Apostles – but the many others who followed Him, who listened to His words, who saw His miracles. Up to this point, they had believed everything that Jesus had said, but this they couldn't believe – that Jesus could give His flesh and blood as true food and drink.

The passage reads: "As a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him." Incidentally, and I'm not saying that there is anything to it, but this passage about the disciples leaving Jesus because of the Eucharist, do you know what passage number it is? John, chapter 6, verse 66, John 6:66. Of course, in Revelation, 666 is the number of the antichrist. Even more interesting is the fact that this is the only chapter 6, verse 66 in the entire Bible. I'm not saying necessarily that there is anything to this. I just personally find this fact ironic that the only chapter 6, verse 66, in the entire Bible concerns leaving Jesus because of disbelief in the Eucharist.

So, why should *we* believe in the Eucharist? We believe because we believe Jesus. We believe because we believe what He says is true. We believe because we believe His word. We choose to believe Him and in choosing to believe Him, we give our life to Him, we put our destiny into His hands. We say to Him, "I am yours." "Who else would we go to, Lord?" to paraphrase Peter, "You and You alone have the words of everlasting life."

By giving us free will God has given us a true power, to love or not to love, to trust Him or not to trust Him. Every day of our lives, no matter what we are confronted with, let us choose with Joshua and with Peter: "I choose you, Lord, and you alone."

**Fr. Mark Gurtner at St. Anthony de Padua, South Bend
21st Sunday of Ordinary Time 2009**