

Bible study #15 Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

This reading is set for one of the last three Sundays of the Church year, when our attention is beginning to be directed towards the return of Jesus and the end of the world. This focus provides a framework or context in which believers are called to right conduct. The coming of God calls us to a distinctive style of life. We can see this in our reading from Joshua 24 which resonates with this theme as it insists on wholehearted and unswerving loyalty to God. Israel is given the opportunity to define itself by choosing and committing to serve God.

We've skipped from the beginning to the end of the book of Joshua in one short week, and if you have time you might like to read through the whole book. The passage we're looking at today marks a watershed moment in the life of ancient Israel. In practical terms, the tribes have succeeded in settling in the land of promise. These stories form the basis of most of the book of Joshua. Now that they have done this, the tribes are to embark on their new life. They are no longer nomads, wandering without a permanent home, but they are now residents of the cities and farmlands of Canaan. This new life is the focus of the book of Judges which follows on from Joshua. So here, the assembly, the gathering at Shechem, marks a transition point from one important and formative era into another. Just like last week we stood on the banks of the Jordan and watched the Israelites cross over, this week we're again on the brink of something new. And here the people have choices to make. So Joshua calls the people together to make a fundamental decision about their allegiance and their identity.

The first three verses set the context of Joshua's challenge to the people. But firstly a note about the venue. Shechem was located in the trough between two sacred mountains (Ebal and Gerizim - see Deuteronomy 27). It is thought that it may have been an important religious site for the Canaanites and others who lived in the land before the Israelites came along. It was prominent in the Old Testament (for example in 1 Kings 12:1-15 all Israel goes to Shechem to make Rehoboam king) and also in the New Testament - Shechem was the location of Jacob's well, and so it features in John 4 in the story of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well.

So it's not coincidental that Shechem becomes the venue for this important ceremony of covenant renewal. There are echoes of Mount Sinai here. Just as Moses mediated the presence of God to the people at Sinai, Joshua does the same thing at Shechem. The final words of verse 1, "they presented themselves before God", show that this is not just a general gathering of the people, but that they are here to encounter Israel's God.

Joshua starts with a summary of the history of Israel. This goes on for a lot of verses, but because this is set to be read in church we only get to hear the beginning of this. If you have time you can read through the intervening verses from 3 to 13. There are similar recitations in Deuteronomy 6:20-25 and Deuteronomy 26:4-9 which indicate that this may have been important in the worship of ancient Israel, forming some kind of creed or affirmation. It's more than just a history lesson- it's important theologically too, as it describes Yahweh's role in the covenant and relationship with Israel. We could perhaps summarise what Joshua has to say in verses 14 and 15 like this: "Seeing as God has done all this, Israel is obliged to respond." These two verses contain the initial challenge. The religious practices and beliefs of Mesopotamia and Egypt are given as negative examples, and instead Joshua urges faithfulness to Yahweh. Joshua isn't happy to simply let them serve God by default - Joshua wants a positive choice from them and he sets an example: "As for me and my

household, we will serve Yahweh.” The people are asked to choose which god they will serve - and this will also shape their own self-identity and the way they see themselves.

Verses 16-18 show the first response of the people in a way that also briefly summarises their history. This is followed by a statement of commitment at the end of verse 18: “Seeing as the LORD has done such great things for us, we will respond with our commitment.” But Joshua isn’t content with this, and he challenges the sincerity of the people in verses 19-20. Perhaps he’s just testing them, or perhaps he really does doubt their capability to live up to the demands of the covenant. Either way, they seem to understand that they are vulnerable, at risk, if they say they will serve Yahweh but don’t, and they assert again, “We will serve the LORD!” More affirmations follow in verses 22-24, and then Joshua makes clear what has been implied all along - that this is a moment of covenant renewal for the people. In verse 25 we read “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day.” This covenant imagery is continued in verse 26, even though that isn’t part of our lectionary reading today, as the references to the book of the law of God and to the large stone carry resonances of Sinai.

The outcome of this assembly at Shechem is that the people of Israel have a renewed understanding of their relationship to God. Israel truly is God’s people, a reality that has been shown in the way God has been involved in their history. And Yahweh is truly Israel’s God, shown in the commitment that has been reaffirmed by the people.

For further reflection:

Read through the passage again, noticing the words and phrases that stand out for you. Imagine yourself in Joshua’s position, and then imagine yourself as one of the gathered people. What thoughts and feelings are you experiencing?

Think of any choices you have had to make recently. These could be big things or small things. How easy or difficult have you found it to make choices? What has influenced your decision? How do you go about discerning which choice to make?

How do you respond to the idea that every day we are called to choose who we will serve and love?

Joshua warns the people of the consequences of their failure to live up to the covenant. As Christians we believe in the forgiveness we find in the covenant with God for us made by Jesus. How easy do you find it to accept this idea of forgiveness? Do you ever find yourself tempted to believe that you are undeserving or unforgivable? How do you respond when you know you’ve made a mistake?

Offer to God any choices that you need to make today, asking for wisdom, guidance and blessing.

Think about the choice that Joshua puts to the people in verse 15: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” Try to ask yourself this question every morning when you wake up - who will I choose to serve today?

Then think about Joshua’s response to this in the same verse: “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Try to say this aloud each day in response to the previous question. At the end of a week see if you can notice what difference this makes to your attitude and approach to people and situations in the course of a day.