

## 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time      Year B

The outstanding figures of Israel's early history, Abraham and Moses, belong to a time when the people were desert nomads, living with their flocks on the steppe country and moving on when they needed new pastures. It was a dramatic change to their way of life when they became settlers on the land. They gave up their tents and built houses; their security, which previously had been centered on belonging to a traveling community, came to be centered more on the land. They became property owners. At the turning point of this history there stands the towering figure of Joshua, the man who succeeded Moses as leader of the people of Israel.

Moses had led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, led them for forty years in their desert wanderings, and moulded them into an organised community based on the Law. Moses accompanied his people as far as Mount Nebo where he overlooked but was not permitted to enter the Promised Land; that role was reserved for his disciple and chief-of-staff, Joshua. It was he who commanded the invasion and conquest of Canaan after leading the people across the river Jordan. After the invasion, he partitioned the land and allotted defined districts to each of the Israelite tribes.

Joshua is celebrated as the bravest field commander in Jewish history. At the North American military academy of West Point, Joshua's name appears in the Hall of Fame. His story is one long military adventure or one long tale of violence – depending on your point of view.

When Joshua is an old man, and the country is resting from war, he calls all the tribes of Israel to the ancient sanctuary at Shechem. The story is told in today's first reading. All the elders, leaders, judges and scribes are called to listen to the last farewell of their distinguished leader. He does not recall his military victories, nor does he ask the people to cherish what he has done for them. Instead, he asks them to choose whom they wish to serve; the God of their ancestors or the false gods of the land they now inhabit.

It's as if Joshua wants to be remembered not as the great military commander who brought his people to the Promised Land but as the prophet who brought his people to choose God again. This inner battle of faith seems to preoccupy him more than his military campaigns ever did. He gives the

people the opportunity to close the book on the past or recommit themselves to the God of Israel.

Joshua is tired; he is old; death is looking him in the face. He has seen too much bloodshed to boast of the beauty of battle. He has seen too many ruined cities and disfigured corpses to sing of the glory of war. Joshua knows that all choices have to be renewed, that people don't stay dedicated to a cause just by continuing to exist. As Israel Zangwill observed about the Jewish tradition: "We are not the chosen people, but the *choosing* people." Joshua asks his people to choose, and he declares before them his own choice to serve the Lord. Thus, Joshua wins the last and most important battle of his life when he leads his people to a victory of fidelity. They declare: "We too will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

The choice that Joshua offered his people is echoed in today's Gospel when Jesus offers his own followers the choice to stay with him or join the ranks of unbelievers. After hearing Jesus' teaching on the bread of life, many of the followers express their complete confusion. They find Jesus' language – about "eating his body and drinking his blood" – intolerable. Many of them do choose to leave him. Then, like Joshua to the twelve tribes, Jesus turns to the twelve apostles and gives them the choice to close the book on their shared past. But just as the twelve tribes told Joshua that they could not reject the Lord after all he had done for them, so Peter asks Jesus how they could turn to anyone else for the message of eternal life. So the apostles exercise their freedom of choice by choosing to stay with Jesus.

Both Joshua and Jesus respect people's freedom of choice. They know that past choices can become old and exhausted, that they can die from being abandoned on the scrap heap of life. Past choices have to be kept alive by new commitment, because decisions in faith are never settled once and for all. The apostles do what we all must do -- keep on choosing Jesus, stay with the one who has the message of eternal life. That is something that will always be outstanding on the agenda.