



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 27 August 2006
Title: **"Tough Choices"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Joshua 24:1-2a,14-25
Second Reading Ephesians 5:21-33
Gospel John 6:60-69

Every three years, on this Sunday, the lectionary gives us this passage from Ephesians to deal with. Every three years, on this Sunday, husbands squirm in their seats and wives get very hostile to old Saint Paul. And I have to do my job as his front man and try to address one of the most difficult passages for men and women in the 21st century to deal with.

This passage from Ephesians is one of the options provided for the service of Holy Matrimony. It is the least-used option. The reason is obvious: that whole bit about "the husband is the head of the wife" and "wives should submit to their husbands." Hardly anybody cares to read the whole passage to see what more Paul might have to say: most young couples don't want a wedding with content, just sentimentality. That's why, although this piece used to be the required Epistle reading for weddings, it is only one of the options now, and not a popular one at that. Do I regret that? Yes, and no. I would rather not have to spend sermon time every wedding I do trying to give excuses for St Paul or for the Christian Church's traditional view about marriage. I have been to weddings where the minister has tried to do that, but a 45-minute sermon just isn't fair to a congregation of folks who are really there to see the bride, get their picture taken and high tail it to the reception. A lost chance, perhaps, but weddings are seldom good opportunities for evangelism.

If one really wants to take Paul seriously, and to learn from what he has to say, then here's a clue: start from the bottom of this passage from Ephesians and work up: hear Paul say first: "This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church." Then you can start to see what Paul is getting at. The submission he writes about becomes not something restricted to husbands and wives, men and women in relationship to each other, but the relationship of all Christians to Christ: a recognition that we are members of Christ, that Christ loves us like a husband loves his wife, and that we are commanded to submit to Christ in everything. That makes sense, and that works even in the 21st century. If we start with our contemporary cultural biases, we'll never get to the central point that Paul is trying to make.

I will be frank. Paul's words about husbands and wives in his letter to the Ephesians have indeed been used by some men (many men...ok, MOST men) to rationalize their subjugation of women for centuries. They have also been the basis for some of the most successful unions of men and women in the centuries since it was written. It's all a question of motive. People are forever using the Bible to find excuses for their behavior. Either they find a passage that they can bend and squeeze into a comfortable shape, or else they wax philosophical about the whole idea of using Scripture as the basis for behavior: "Times have changed since that was written- we no longer think that way." Indeed, both of those things are true, and that's part of the problem. What is new is not necessarily better. And what we think about morality in this messy, compromised and hypocritical beginning of a new century is certainly not worthy of being treated as a universal standard. I don't want us to follow the example of the fanatical sects of contemporary Islam who want to enforce oppressive religious laws written in the 8th century. But I do want us to take seriously what Paul is saying about our mutual relationships both with each other and, more importantly, with Christ Himself: that we are dependent on each other, that we must submit ourselves body and soul to God, and that this remains true no matter what the secular climate dictates.

Our Anglican Church throughout the world is going through a bad patch. Conflicts between conservatives and liberals give the impression that we don't know what we're doing or what we believe anymore. It used to be said as a joke that the

Episcopal Church was notable for having nice services, but not making one believe anything. Some may want that to be true, but not me, and the teachings in this Church, at least on my watch here in this place, will continue to be based on Scripture, on Tradition and on Reason- not feelings, not sentimentality, and certainly not on the latest fad, philosophy or "do it yourself" religion.

That's not easy. It's not easy trying to discern the difference between timeless teachings about submission to Christ from culturally limited policies about masculine superiority. But to avoid the process of finding the balance between them is to take the cowards' way out. That's why I encourage as many as possible to begin Bible study when it starts up again, or at least to do some personal reading about what the Church actually teaches on important issues. Yes, it takes work, but whoever told you that being an informed, mature Christian was really easy lied to you! Know what Christianity actually teaches, what the Bible actually says!

In today's Gospel, we are told that when the implications of Jesus' teachings started to become clear to his followers, things about body and blood and death on a cross, some started to leave. It wasn't "fun" anymore- it required work. And so it has ever been. That's what Joshua discovered, too, when in our Old Testament reading today he reads the riot act to the people of Israel about trying to combine their religion with the whoop-tee-doo fertility cults of Canaan. "Choose!" says Joshua. And the people say, "We will serve the Lord for He is our God." At least they're going to try.

Every Sunday, when we gather here at the Lord's Table to hear His word and to share this sacred food, we are asked the same thing and are given the opportunity to choose what kind of religion we affirm. It is meant to be taken personally, and personally, I think like Peter in today's Gospel, "Lord, whom shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life...we know that you are the Holy One of God." That's true for husbands, wives, children...everybody. It's not particularly easy, but to whom else can we go for the words of life? No, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

