

Bob Dylan has a song called you gotta serve somebody. Dylan based this song on the first reading from Joshua, where Joshua poses the question "decide today whom you will serve?" This question is a very direct question. And while many things in life are not so black and white, there are times when we are faced with choices that can be black and white. And, as Joshua points out, deciding who we are going to serve, this is one of those times. Jesus himself says you cannot serve God and Mammon. So, this choice is presented to us - decide who you are going to serve. Will it be the Lord, or will it be some other god? Because, as Bob Dylan accurately states in his song, "you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed. You're gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, But you're gonna have to serve somebody."

So, who will it be? Who are you going to serve?

Now, at first this question seems so simple. The obvious answer is that I will serve God. But let's be honest, how many of us do this?

You see, this reading gives us an opportunity to be spiritually honest. If you "gotta serve somebody," as Bob Dylan phrases it, then the question that we must ask ourselves is "who is it that we are serving?" Certainly we all want to say that we are serving God, as did Joshua and his family, but is that really the case? Do we really serve God, or do we often serve other things that are not God?

I'll be honest, I find this reading challenging, because so often I get distracted from my call to serve God. And this reading poses a direct challenge to me that I need to take seriously. Because there are a lot of times that I allow other things to take the central role in my life. Sometime it's money - yes, even priests worry about money and retirement. Other times it is family and other times it is career. And none of these things are bad in themselves. As one of my seminary professors reminded us, we are not puritans, and so we don't say that material things are bad. Money is not bad in itself, but can't be the central concern, the central motivating force in our lives. Jesus makes this clear when talking to the rich young man. Similarly, families are not bad, and certainly they can be very good things. But when pleasing our family becomes the focus of our lives, and takes precedence over serving God, then it's problematic. Jesus pointed this out when he told the man who wanted to bury his father before following Jesus, to let the dead bury the dead. Jesus was not saying that families are bad, but he was pointing out that serving family cannot take precedence over serving God.

Now far be it from me to say that following the Lord is easy. Even Jesus knew this was not easy. In fact, he told his disciples if they wanted to follow him they would need to take up their cross. And in today's Gospel, after preaching the very difficult message that his body was real food and his blood real drink, and that unless people ate his body and drank his blood they would not have life within him, Jesus finds that this teaching is too difficult for some people. And these people walk away, as they are unable to follow the Lord.

Certainly we see this today in our own society. How many people turn away from the Church, the body of Christ in the world, because they cannot bring themselves to follow teachings of the Lord. How many people say that moral teachings of the Church on life issues such as abortion or end of life care are too difficult to accept, and in doing so, turn away from the Lord, and serve somebody

else? How often do we Catholics hear the Church's teachings on contraception or cohabitation and say that it is not very realistic, and turn from away from Christ? How often do we make excuses as to why they cannot go to Mass - there is a soccer game, there is a family event, I am on vacation, etc. When we do these things, we must ask ourselves, are we truly serving God, or is the game, or movie, or play the real motivating force? Or, to make my point even more poignant, how many people are going to leave right after communion rather than stay through the entirety of Mass in order to get to breakfast before the crowd, or avoid the rush in the parking lot? When we do these things, we have not placed God at the center, but we have placed ourselves at the center, we no longer are serving God, but are serving our own desires, which is the definition of selfishness.

Now, I know what you are thinking - Wait a minute? Did this priest just advocate staying through the entirety of Mass? Did he just advocate following the Church's teachings? All of them? Well, let me respond with the words of Jesus from today's Gospel, "Does this shock you? . . . Do you also want to leave?" Or perhaps I should place the question of Joshua before you, "if it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve."

Hopefully you will be able to answer as the Israelites by saying "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD for the service of other gods." Or better yet, answer in the words of Simon Peter (That is St. Peter, not your pastor) by saying "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."