

The Scriptural book of Joshua, which immediately follows the Pentateuch and begins to recount Jewish history after Moses, is typically remembered for a few dramatic moments. The book recounts the stopping of the waters of the Jordan River so that the people could cross into the promised land—a miracle like that performed when crossing the Red Sea in the flight from Egypt. Here too we learn of how Jericho was delivered to Joshua by walking around the city each day for seven days and blowing trumpets. And while many are puzzled by it, nobody forgets the day Joshua made the sun stand still.

The book records the conquest of the promised land, including even some of the strategies used, but much of it is a mere accounting of which kings were defeated and which of the Jewish tribes took each territory—a summary with very little drama. The larger spiritual purpose of the work seems to be to serve as a recapitulation of the principal lessons imparted to the Israelites by Moses. For example, the Jewish males are circumcised again, since all those circumcised under Moses had died in the wilderness during their forty years of wandering, a punishment imposed for their disobedience.

Circumcision is a sign of the Covenant, a sign of a people set apart. Moreover, shortly before his death, Joshua emphasizes that God has fulfilled His bargain by giving the Israelites possession of the land. Joshua leads the tribes in renewing the Covenant, reminding the people of the absolute need to obey all of God's laws, and to be faithful to Him alone—if they wish to prosper in the land God has given them. Yet there is another side to this spiritual lesson, because even in taking possession of what God has promised, the people fail to love and obey God as they have vowed to do. These betrayals in the presence of the actual gift are surely more serious than the grumbling along the way, when what they were to receive was taken only on faith.

In other words, now that the promise is fulfilled, the people still fall short. The direct result is that their lives become far more of a struggle than should have been the case. Here is a lesson which applies directly to each of us.

Exhortation

The lesson becomes more evident when we consider the manner in which Joshua brings the tribes to recommit themselves to the Covenant. First he says: Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve.... [Josh 24:14-15]

As we expect, the people answer: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD...; therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God" (24:16-18). But hear what Joshua says in reply: You cannot serve the LORD; for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good. [24:19-20]

Nonetheless, the people insist: "No; but we will serve the LORD (v. 21). And Joshua proclaims: "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him" (v. 22).

Witnesses against ourselves

Are we not all witnesses against ourselves? I think here especially of us Catholics, who profess our faith at every Mass or, even if we seldom profess our faith, still claim the name of "Catholic". We who pay lip service to virtue and then commit sin, are we not witnesses against ourselves? We who put our hand to the plow only to look back (Lk 9:62)?

Under Joshua, the Jewish people agreed, “We are witnesses.” What, then, does Joshua say after this? “Then put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel” (Josh 24:23, emphasis added). We are the same. The priest at Mass, after the Gloria and the Creed, might well say: “You are witnesses against yourselves. So put away the foreign gods whom you serve instead of the LORD.” Indeed, the priest might well quote Joshua’s last words to his people, and then do as Joshua did:

“Behold, this [altar] stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD which he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.” So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance. [Josh 24:27-28]

What then will our inheritance be? One thing is certain: We will either enter into it with far more struggle than should have been necessary, or we will not enter into it at all.