

The Book of Joshua is rarely read in the context of worship today, but it used to be what people read often in the gathering of people in public worship. It is part of Deuteronomist history, which includes Deuteronomy, the book of Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. It covers almost 420 years, from Moses' death to the first fall of Jerusalem, which led to the Babylonian exile. 597BCE. These books were compiled under the Judean King Josiah and edited every time they were read during this exile and post-exile period.

Chapter 24 and its verses emphasize the theme of Deuteronomy: the importance of worshipping YHWH and no other gods. For them, this was a framework for understanding the past. Their past was defined by times when YHWH alone was worshipped and when the people turned to other gods. They did well when YHWH was worshipped alone but did not do so well when they turned to other gods.

This was in time and place, where they were at a crossroads and about to enter life in the promised land. Moses died a long time ago, and even Joshua died shortly after this. So, Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, a place that has a significant meaning in the Bible. This was where Abram received God's promise of the land. It was a city of refuge where Joseph was buried and was once even the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Shechem was also a place of worship. Abram, Jacob, and generations after they built an altar for the Lord, calling it El Elohe Israel, which meant the mighty God of Israel.

And this was a place of commitment. Here, Joshua gathered the people of Israel, including the elders, leaders, judges, officials of Israel, and the entire community, and they presented themselves before God in worship. Joshua reminded them of the story of their people, starting with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses and the story of the Exodus. How God led them through the exiles living in the desert until they came to the promised land, and how God gave them into their hands, Amorites, Moab, Jericho, and all others who fought against them. In verse 13, The Lord God says, "So I have given you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build, but you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."

In other words, all the battles fought and won, and the land they possessed was not their achievements and efforts; God had done all for them in keeping with his promise and being faithful. Will they serve God or forget all that and serve the new gods of the land they are about to enter?

Joshua demanded the people to "Choose this day whom you will serve." Between serving the God of Abraham, who had delivered them from Egypt, and the false gods their ancestors had served on the other side of the Euphrates River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land they now lived. The people chose to serve

YHWH their God, a decision Joshua recorded in the Book of the Law of God, and he then erected a memorial stone "under the oak that was nearby" in Shechem.

This echoes in our gospel reading, John 6. 56-69.

We have already heard much about what Jesus said: I am the bread of life. I am the bread from heaven. And how people reacted to him. How offended they were and how angry they were in response to Jesus. And now, in these last few verses, he talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. As we have reflected on a few Sundays before, this could make anyone feel weird. Of course, we know this was a symbolic way of saying that through Jesus, we have been invited to an intimate and transformative relationship with God. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like your ancestors ate and died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Many who heard, and even among those who followed Jesus as his disciples, found it hard to hear (involuntary), and it was challenging to listen or understand (voluntary). They said, "This teaching is difficult. Who could accept it?" And so, in the end, they all left shaking their heads, just as Jesus had predicted. In verse 64, Jesus says to his disciples, "The word I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life, yet there are some of you who do not believe." Verse 65, "For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him." So from that day on, only a few followed Jesus, 12 exactly according to John, and those who followed were accredited by their commitment to follow Jesus for the reason that Peter describes in verse 67, "***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.***"

Following Jesus was not easy; it was not sustainable through our own ability to understand what he says. Faith does not come from our ability to listen or hear and completely understand things; faith is a different kind of knowing in that we know through experience and living. There will be a time when we can't even hear or understand. We might even feel 'offended' as Jesus said in verse 61, and there might be a time when we feel like giving up, like in V.67, Jesus asks, do you want to leave too, do you? And there will be a time when we must decide whether to follow, like in verse 68. Jesus said that following and abiding in him is possible only through an intimate relationship with him; it is only possible through experiencing his life and spirit and knowing and believing in his body and blood. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them." In verse 56.

Today, as we come together to celebrate our past 12 months in AGM if you like, we are following the tradition of the faithful people even beyond the history of our church here in APC, maybe going back to ancient times. As God's people, we come together to remember our past, reflecting on how God has loved us and led us during the last twelve months. We thank God for his wisdom and transforming words. We thank God for his generous and spacious love. We thank God for his compassion and mercy. We thank God, who loved us through our successes and failures. He loves us even when we get things wrong; he waits for us to turn to him with our hearts to renew and reform. We confess that we belong to God. And we abide in him who calls us to be his body where each of us is a member.

This is why the AGM in the church is different from any other AGM. Our present transforms our past into our future, where we renew our faith and remember our experience of God of the past that we recognize today will strengthen our future and all God will do with us.

Today, inspired by the Word of God, let us renew our faith and commitment to Christ and God again. Please join me in this word and the responses.

So, firstly, just as Joshua asked the people gathered in Shechem, let us ask ourselves... So, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your own making, the god of your selfish ambition, complacency, and desire. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

We will serve the Lord.

Secondly, do you also wish to go away when things are too confusing or too challenging to hear or understand?

Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know you are the Holy One of God.

Glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be a world without end. Amen.