

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - John 6: 60 – 69

A climber fell off a cliff. As he tumbled down into a deep gorge he grabbed hold of a branch of a small tree. “Help” he shouted. “Is there anyone up there?” A deep majestic voice from the sky echoed through the gorge. “I will help you, my son. But first you must have faith in me.” “All right, all right. I trust you.” answered the man. The voice replied, “Let go of the branch.” There was a long pause and the man shouted again, “Is there anyone else up there?”

There are two ways to live life. One way is by **responding** and the other is by **deciding**. And the path you adopt will influence everything.

If you live by responding you adopt a passive attitude towards life. The ups and downs of life are in control, and your role is only to react to them. If you win the lottery everything is good. If you lose your job, there is only sadness and despair.

On the other hand if you live your life by **deciding**, you exert some control over your future and who you will be. By claiming a say in your future, you can shape the ups and downs of life rather than having them shape you.

The power to decide is real. It can operate in even the most dire of circumstances. The psychiatrist Victor Frankl spent three years in a Nazi concentration camp. In his memoirs, *Man's Search For Meaning*, he asserts that he was able to survive those three years because he retained the freedom to choose.

Now this is a remarkable claim because the freedom to choose is almost non-existent in a Nazi concentration camp. You cannot choose what to wear, when you are going to sleep or work, what you are going to eat. You cannot choose when you might live or die.

Yet Viktor Frankl claimed that he never gave up his freedom to choose how he would live the next moment. He said even though every other freedom was taken from him he was able to retain the most basic freedom—the freedom to determine what your attitude would be in any circumstance, the freedom to choose your own way.

Now what did Frankl mean? An example. There was always a shortage of food in the concentration camp – not enough food to keep everyone alive. But Viktor Frankl chose not to steal food from those that were weaker than he was.

However much he wanted to, he chose not to pry bread out of the hands of children and the elderly and the sick simply because he had the strength to do so.

He watched as many members of the camp did exactly that – stealing bread from the hungry and the weak so that they might live. He watched how they indeed did live for weeks and months longer whereas those from whom they stole the food quickly died.

But he also watched how those same people who lived longer often lost the will to live. They knew that they had lost their humanity, becoming animals in feeding off each other.

Frankl chose to starve rather than feed off the weakness of others. He chose to die rather than lose his humanity. He insists that this choice is what gave him the will to survive. Although every other freedom was taken from him, he was still able to retain the freedom to choose.

Now it is clear that today's readings call us to live life not by responding but by choosing, by deciding. Joshua says in the first reading "As for me and my household we will serve the Lord".

Even though many of the other disciples abandon Jesus because of the difficulty of His teaching, Peter speaks for the twelve and

says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? **You** have the words of eternal life”.

So, the scriptures today say that a Christian is one who is willing to **decide**. To decide, that is, as long as we understand what deciding is and what it is not.

Here is where we must make an important distinction. Deciding does not mean that we believe that our decisions will necessarily be effective. Deciding is not magic.

God is the only one whose decisions always have effect. It is God alone who can say, “Let there be light,” and there is light. We do not have that kind of decision-making power.

We cannot say, “I decide I will never contract cancer. I decide that that person will love me. I decide that my children will never become addicted to drugs.” There are many things in life over which we **do not** have control. Saying that we decide to accomplish them does not make it so.

Christian deciding, then, is not believing that we can control our lives. Christian deciding is **choosing to believe**. To believe that God is real and active in our lives and in our world and to choose to be open to that action and cooperate with it.

A Christian who has cancer has the freedom to choose to live life each day rather than enduring life as a victim. A Christian who is rejected in love can choose to move on to a new relationship in which love is possible. Christians whose children become addicted to drugs have the freedom to choose still to be parents and still to be supportive, even if they are disappointed.

In every circumstance we have the freedom to choose, the freedom to believe that God is real and present. We can choose to remain open to that presence.

In every circumstance we have the freedom to live with love, with justice with integrity. Although we cannot always control what we must face in life, we can choose how we will **live** life.

The ups and downs of life are not in control. **You are.**

So decide today to live in mercy and in justice. Decide today to live in love and integrity. Decide today to believe that God is active in this moment and that God is leading you to joy. AMEN.