21st Sunday Ordinary Time, B

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is a commonly known fact that people of the ancient world believed there were many gods. In early biblical history, each nation had its god, whom they worshiped and upon whom they depended for the necessities of life. Later, in the times of the Greek and Roman empires, people believed in gods who overreached national boundaries but had limited categories of concern and responsibility.

This ancient belief is generally outdated. In this modern, more enlightened age, we now believe in only one God, who is the creator and sustainer of all things. But whether that conclusion is true depends upon how we are using the word, God. If we are speaking of our doctrine, then it is true that we believe in only one God. If, however, we are speaking of that as a factor in life, which we truly worship and serve, that something or someone to which we give our devotion, then it is obvious that we have more than one God. We no longer use the ancient vocabulary, but we do worship and serve many different gods.

If we hold that thought in mind, then our reading from the Old Testament takes on fresh meaning. Moses was dead, and Joshua had assumed leadership of the people of Israel. It was now time to lead them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. But

before doing that, he called them together and addressed them with these words: **“Decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

If we read that text in terms of doctrine, then it is ancient and outdated. If we read it in terms of life and practice, then it becomes very modern.

The first thing it tells us is that there is no such thing as atheism. It is nothing more than a doctrine. It is the intellectual stance of a person who says, I do not believe in God. In that sense, of course, there are many atheists. But we are not thinking now of theory; we are thinking of life. We are speaking of god as that something or someone in which a person believes and to which he devotes himself. In this practical sense, everyone is a believer; no one is a practicing atheist.

One of the deepest truths about human life is that we must give ourselves to something; we must belong to something; we must have gods. Life becomes virtually unbearable for that person who has nothing to worship and to serve. We all have our servants - modern conveniences such as cars, televisions, computers, electric lights, and many other things. These things are nice to have, but all the conveniences in the world cannot make life worth living unless

the things we serve are worth serving. Each of us is faced with a forced decision. We will have gods; that is inevitable. Our only option is to choose whom or what our gods will be. So, the challenge of Joshua is just as relevant today as it was the day it was spoken: **"Decide today whom you will serve."** There is no such thing as a practical atheist.

Our text also speaks to us about the problem of competing and conflicting gods. The ancient Greeks used to tell stories about the gods arguing and fighting up on Mount Olympus. To our modern minds, it seems incredible that people could believe such a thing. But the idea is not as absurd as at first it might seem. We all are faced with the problem of competing loyalties.

A man, for example, may be devoted to his home and his business, and find those two in an occasional state of conflict. Building and maintaining a good home requires both time and attention. Of course, the same thing is true of a business. Since there are only twenty-four hours in a day and seven days in a week, there will be times when that man will have to decide which of his gods is stronger.

On a larger scale, we are all faced with a similar conflict, national interests, and the desire for international understanding and peace. Most of us love our country, and because of that, I am reasonably confident. We also long for the day when all the nations

of the world will work together in a spirit of cooperation. So, what happens when some special interest of our nation comes in conflict with the needs and desires of other nations? How do we resolve that conflict?

Once again, in the everyday business of living, we must resolve conflicts between competing loyalties, and decide who or what our god is.

This brings us to one final thought, which is the importance of having one God who is big enough to unify all of life. Joshua made a choice, which pulled everything together around one central loyalty: **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."**

The supreme difference between the one true God and the many false gods is this: Devotion to the one true God pulls life together; devotion to a false god tears it apart.

Worshiping the one true God includes every other: worthwhile devotion in life. You may love your home, and you should. It is a revelation of and a pathway to the true and living God. You may love your work or business. That is well and good. If you run it honestly, it is an instrument in the hands of God. You may love your country devotedly and yet recognize that God is the Father of all nations and cares for each as much as the other.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The one true God is big enough to include every good thing on earth. To worship and serve him is to pull life together around one supreme devotion. To worship any of the smaller gods is to tear life apart. Long ago, Joshua made a decision, which has stood the test of time, and is still the wisest choice for every person: **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Amen.**