**H. J. Schilder ~ Joshua 24: 15b**

*“But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

**The power of choice**

Psalm 105: 2, 3

Psalm 105: 15

Read ~ Joshua 24: 1-31

Psalm 115: 1, 2, 5

Text ~ Joshua 24: 15b

Psalm 135: 6, 7, 8

Psalm 135: 10

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ

A learned commentator on this chapter calls the preceding verses, verses 2-13, a ’history lesson for the youth’. This appears oversimplified. Joshua speaks to the assembled people by addressing the leaders and representatives. He speaks according to the Lord’s directive: thus says the Lord. Furthermore, he speaks at an official location during a national assembly at Shechem, a city with an old heathen and an old biblical history. Yet the typifying is justified; a history lesson for the youth. Because those whom Joshua deals with - whom the Lord deals with, in whose name Joshua speaks, - is the youngest generation that is represented at this Shechem.

Here Joshua tells the history of the past for the youth of the future, with an eye upon that future.

Now, the story results in the conclusions Joshua draws out in verses 14 and 15. For the older ones, and still more for the younger ones. He focuses these conclusions in this text when he speaks of the choice made by himself and his house in order to place the people and the youth of the church before this choice on this historic moment between the past and the future. We summarize our text as follows:

Having chosen, Joshua now sets the people of God before a choice at the transition from the past to the future.

1) he sets the people before the indicated choice;

2) he sets the people before the communal choice;

3) he sets the people before the faithful choice.

**ONE**

In the church “choice” never signifies an open-ended choice. This is contrary to what the world does. In the world, and certainly in today’s world, everything must be open-ended. In this vein for example the terms ‘antithesis’, contradistinction, are gladly exchanged for ‘dialogue’, talking back and forth, in which everyone has the right to speak equally.

By using the word ‘but’ Joshua already makes such a dialogue impossible for God’s people. He does not speak for himself privately, but actually as leader of God’s people. He speaks at an historic moment, for the future in the promised and designated land lies before them. Certainly much had been done already in the conquering of this country beforehand, but also much had been left for the future. And with it possibly many opportunities for making choices. The fact that until now the people have chosen for the Lord does not mean that they will always remain doing so. In the church nothing is a matter of course. It is not a matter of course that you make a good choice and will always keep doing so. Joshua had already pointed that out in the preceding verses. The word “but” separates the one choice possibility from the many other possibilities which have been chosen in the past. We have just read about that in the preceding verse and in verse 15a. What is written there we hardly find anywhere else in Holy Scripture. Namely that the fathers have served other gods in the land where Abraham came from and in the land of Egypt from which the people were delivered. This had never been said before, nor has ever been so strongly said afterwards. It is as if the Lord will not needlessly speak evil of His people in Scripture. He does not like to bring up old sins. But now, at this new beginning it was necessary. It must be so in order to show that there are, also later, many choices such as there never have been in the past.

Many people, especially the older ones, sometimes have the urge to talk of the ‘good old days’, compared to now. But does everything that has come from the past have to be obscured? Joshua suggests the opposite here. Your fathers served strange gods from high and low, from east and west. Now you receive the choice anew when you come into Canaan. Namely, that is if you do not keep choosing Yahweh. There you have even a very broader choice, whether the gods from old Mesopotamia, or those of the new Canaan. No shortage of choices. If you choose not to remain with the Lord then you are neither completely old fashioned nor modern. You can still do so in an old fashioned way or a modern one.

At the same time Joshua makes it known that everything is on the line. We also say this to today’s younger generation. There are many possibilities outside of the Lord, many options. People often come with the idea that modern theology and modern ethics have much that is new. But oh, also the new has been in evidence for centuries. Via the so called newly imported drug culture many come back into the old eastern mystique. And experiments that can be compared to such things as contemporary group sex, were already practiced by the old Canaanite and other eastern religions centuries ago. Astrology, which has made a comeback, was busily practiced in the land where the fathers first came from, and cooperated with. Today people act as though they are finally experiencing a new age. But it is all so old fashioned. Oh how the Lord, who sees the centuries as in a moment, will laugh, mockingly, in His holy wrath. Joshua also does so with his holy historical discharge. ’If you do not choose for the Lord, then you have a wide range of choices between old and modern possibilities. But you must know one thing and that is that the old and the new come down to the same thing. So that only the one choice remains; the one for the Lord. Thereby Joshua puts his choice in contrast with all the others, with all the other new or old possibilities.

In doing so he puts them before a pre-directed choice. Something happens here as also happens in communist countries and other dictatorships; the ballot gives only one possibility. But with this difference, that the only choice considered to be legal by Joshua is the choice for the good God. For the only One who has delivered His people.

What he can say about the only One whose Name should be on the ballot can be said about no other, whether modern or old fashioned. Who else had deployed Himself so much throughout the centuries in order to make something great, a people that had received possession of a beautiful land, and that from a such a poor beginning in Abraham? Who else has shown so much patience with this so often unthankful people? Who else had ever smoothed out the road in order to make true His promises? In short, who else has shown Himself to be such a Savior, such a God of free grace. A God whom you may know in the birth, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is this a difficult choice congregation? Is it uncertain for the future? Is it a dishonest vote? Or is the future opened up here when the Lord puts the people before a choice through Joshua.

The answer is clear. The answer has already been prepared by Joshua in the preceding words, He did not say that they could choose between the Lord and other gods. He actually said: ‘if is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord’ then you have ample choice between old and new. ‘If it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord’, this is what bible commentators call the irony of Joshua. But that is not saying enough. It is actually a grim earnestness. And therefore pastoral language, revealing language.

A sinner in church will not quickly admit that it is an evil thing to serve the Lord. He will say that it is the most beautiful of everything. Yet at the same time he hobbles about with two thoughts. Therefore says Joshua, who as prophet draws these conclusions from God’s commission; if you do not truly fear the Lord and break with all other gods - then you actually will find the service of the Lord a bad business. ‘If it is evil in your eyes’ - in our language this can be repeated more fluently: ‘if it displeases you’, ‘if it does not agree with you’. But then nothing must be lost of the force of the word ‘evil’. We must especially maintain this forcefulness, congregation. If we do not serve Him radically, we will find it a burdensome business, a calamity for our lives to keep choosing for Him. Then we also will never persevere in the decision. Then we are irrevocably driven to the choice for other gods, old or new, and these come down to the same thing. For then we find it a burdensome matter to serve Him who is the God of all grace and freedom. This we must know clearly in any case and not hide it with subterfuge. In such a case a minister could address a youth who hesitates to do profession of faith as follows: ‘do you find it a calamity to serve the Lord and as a result choose for the devil? Yes, then you have a broad list of choices in the religions and culture of the world around you’. By this the choice is cuttingly presented and made aware of and directed to the only possible outcome, a vote for the one Name which the covenant ballot allows, the only name which is given under heaven for salvation.

**TWO**

And this choice is one in fellowship. Today this so devalued, so misused. But Joshua makes it concrete: ‘Me and my house‘. He does not say “me” in his specific individual person, in isolation. He says it in relation to his connection with the community he oversees and in which he has direct authority. ‘Me and my house’ - this is the language of office. Not directly to family history, but the history of what the New Testament will call: the Kingdom of God. In this sacred history Joshua’s house had a central position. ‘House’ does not mean the tribe of Ephraim here (which already then, and afterwards, often carried on in a self-willed way) . Nor does it say generation for that would be too broad. But ‘house’ means as much as family, Joshua’s family. The house of the leader Joshua, Moses’ successor. At the same time this word has somewhat of an ‘official’ ring to it; you can compare it to what we mean when we speak of the ‘the royal house’.

‘Me and my house.’ This is more than a personal expression. Joshua is not talking about a pleasant family life ‘indoors’. These words are therefore also not a prediction of how it will go later. It does not follow from this text that the family history of Joshua’s house would later be so exemplary. With the exile of the northern kingdom, just to mention a point in time, an end had come to the distant generations of Joshua’s house. That house must also have been inflamed by the apostasy which drove Ephraim to destruction, because it choose the modern and with that, the old gods. But at this moment Joshua does what he can, he speaks in the official communion of the fellowship which he can oversee and over which he has leadership, by which Israel knows him publicly: ‘Me and my house”.

This means at the same time the choice (in and with the fellowship) for isolation away from all old fashioned and modern possibilities. ‘Me and my house’: that is already a prequel for a much later prophecy of the ‘remnant’ which repent before Yahweh and renew their choice for Him. Commentators will say that this is law and not gospel. But it is the joyful message of Jesus Christ; Joshua’s own choice is determined as a consequence of the official choice for the communion of saints. And this choice is asked of you today within the fellowship in which the Lord places you, in Christ; the fellowship of His church. Here in this place, and in this country, remaining close to home. And already here, in this land, such a choice means a Christian, a Reformed isolation.

When you say yes to the Lord, you stand alone along with your faithful community. Alone even within your own society, that could be your fellow workers, your friends and perhaps even your family. It is good to realize this in all clarity. I do not say that you won’t find any recognition from others. But you will only discover them when you, with your fellow believers make a concrete choice for the Lord. This becomes difficult in this country. Your neighbors will take it ill of you when you have a large family. They take it ill of you if you do not sing along in the religious ecumenical choir. Your colleagues and acquaintances - and your children: your friends and teachers at school - will think it ill of you when you do not choose for the modern gods and when you say that they differ very little from the old ones. But the Lord asks for the choice in the fellowship into which He takes you through Christ. Your choice, now in the office of all believers.

That is of such a great benefit. Certainly this text is stringent. But therein also so merciful. ‘Me and my house’: Joshua does not stand alone. He stands, choosing, with his household, in the communion which Christ gathers for Himself for eternal life. Here Yahweh still gives him his house. Yet the emphasis indeed lies on him as being the responsible and symbolic leader. His perspective is not kept within the privacy of his family, but in the elected remnant. You also are not alone when you say yes to the Lord on your own. This means, according to the context of the text, saying yes to the Lord as He has led His people in the past and keeps leading it in the future. Accordingly therefore, the familiar expression ’me and my house’, also has to do with your own household and family, as it did with Joshua. We said already that that is not the first thing. But it is included with it. Moreover, after Christ’s birth and resurrection it has still more to do with the household of His church than before. You are not left alone, you are not left to your own lot. Beside you stands a powerful hero, God, born from a virgin, and therefore there stands beside you a household, a family. Do you ask her name? Know then that she is called God’s church, the blessing is bestowed on her.

**THREE**

That is the perspective of faith’s choice. ‘We will serve Yahweh’. We ‘will’ do it. Translated differently would be: we do it and will keep doing it. This is confessional language from the community which says yes in unison when choosing for the Lord alone. But then also to serve. Not just to say yes, but to serve Him according to His commandments.

Do you say ‘yes’ to this easily? The people did so in Joshua’s time. They didn’t have much difficulty with Joshua’s new beginning after his upcoming death, his new beginning in a modern world. But then Joshua let them feel that it was not so simple, verse 19. It could be that you do not know yourself so well, it is possible that you do not take the Lord seriously. Therefore Joshua sharpens up on the choice when he continues. Then he says, as in verse 23 for example; put away the strange gods you have among you and direct your hearts toward the Lord, the God of Israel. With this he again says things which we hardly ever find anywhere in the bible. But we will leave that aside. We only ascertain that Joshua thought things were still too shallow with that first ‘yes’. That does happen in the church; to say yes and still continue to hold onto the strange, the old and new gods. But serving the Lord is to say: a choice of faith by faith, away with all others gods and direct your hearts to Him. That is the reason for the sharp language. And it is this faith choice which is brought under oath at the end of the chapter as the point of departure for the new beginning.

So, congregation, put away every inclination toward strange gods, and train to direct your hearts upon the Lord and for consistency in serving Him. Future ages will testify of this later - that there were parents, boys and girls, who made the choice of faith and persevered also. The inheritance of the promised land is tied to that choice, of the Christ, of the earth and the heavenly Canaan, of a new heaven and earth which will be filled with the service to the only God.

Amen