

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson

Sunday 8th August 2021 - 19th Sunday in ordinary time

Readings (Year B): 1st: 1 Kings 19:4-8. Psalm: 33. 2nd: Ephesians 4:30-5:2. Gospel: John 6:41-51.

These past 18 months of the pandemic have left quite a number of people, feeling very much like Elijah, who'd had enough. Most of us feel 'Oh Lord, how long.' For some it has caused a very deep & bad depression.

That was Elijah. He'd reached the end of his tether; feels his life is a failure. This fearless prophet of the Lord, has been forced by his arch enemy Jezebel, Queen of Israel and King Ahab's wife, to flee into the desert in fear of his life. He feels he's failed in his attempt to stem the progress of paganism in Israel, which Jezebel was assiduously fostering.

Like Moses, who also had been Israel's spiritual leader and who sometimes came close to despair, Elijah makes a journey through the desert under the guidance of God, who does not allow Elijah to die, but miraculously feeds him, giving him new strength and new hope, so that he can make the journey to the mountain of God, sometimes called Horeb or Sinai, where we know he had a decisive encounter with God, who was made known to him not in the earthquake, wind or fire, but the still small voice of calm.

God removes, not Elijah's problems, but his despair and weakness. He renews his faith and strength, so that he can face the challenges of life and resume his struggle to defend true faith.

The gospel too presents a defining moment in the life of Jesus and his followers. As with Elijah it is a matter of life and death, of faith versus unbelief; of making the journey which leads to the presence of God.

As ever the Jews who have been following Jesus are complaining. Although Jesus has just miraculously fed the 5000, they are grumbling because of who he claims to be. They know fine well who he is, Joseph's son. How can he claim to be more? How can he have come from heaven? Jesus' claim to be the bread of life raises the crucial question of his status and of his relationship to the Father.

In this passage Jesus does not answer the question directly; rather he asserts more explicitly and more uncompromisingly than before, his claim to uniqueness. He has indeed been sent by the Father to be the only means by which humanity can have access to him. Jesus promises that those who do believe in him will have everything they need – the essentials of life. He is the bread of life, what they need to live. Just as God fed Elijah to enable him to make the journey to God’s presence, so Jesus tells us that anyone who wishes to come to God must be fed by him.

To come to the Father is to be drawn by Jesus. And what he offers is a food which undoes the disobedience of that defining moment in Eden, when death entered the world through the sin of Adan and Eve. Jesus invites his followers to a decisive moment – to belief in him. Those who eat this food will never die.

We all face defining moments, when the reality of life tests our faith. But when we sit under our own particular furze tree, God sends his angel to nourish and strengthen us.

See how gently God deals with Elijah. God doesn’t scold him and tell him just to keep on going. God’s message to Elijah is: eat, rest, have a break from all this. Then eat, then sleep some more, then get back to your roots, to Mount Horeb/Sinai, back to God. But there is the clue. God.

Fr Freddie Faber in his hymn, “There’s a wideness in God mercy” has these lovely lines: “There is no place where earth sorrows are more felt than up in heaven; there is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given”

Jesus encourages us to carry on with the journey, which we make under the shadow of **his** tree – the cross of Christ- which is at the heart of every Mass.

As St Paul reminds us in the 2nd Reading, “Christ loves us and gave himself up as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.”

The Psalmist invites: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Canon Philip Dyson

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