

Commentary to the 19 Sunday Ordinary Time, B

Food for the Journey



In today's first reading we come upon the prophet Elijah, fleeing in the desert from the terrible Queen Jezebel. Jezebel had sworn to kill Elijah in retaliation for Elijah's killing the false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elijah fled to the desert. He would try to cross it. He knew that the soldiers wouldn't think he would go there. No one could survive crossing the desert. That's where we find Elijah in that first reading. Elijah had had enough. He was out of food and water. More than that, he just didn't have the fortitude or the stamina to continue to do God's work. He laid down under that broom tree, and he said to God, "Look, I just can't do this anymore. I'm no better than anyone who has come before me. I just can't continue your mission to Israel." And he fell asleep, hoping to die. But the angel of the Lord woke Elijah and gave him food and water.

Elijah fell asleep again, and again the angel of the Lord woke Elijah and told him to eat and drink. And, the reading concludes with the nourishment the Lord provided, he walked forty days and forty night to the mountain of God Horeb. God gave Elijah the power to complete the mission. Elijah first had to journey to the same mountain that Moses journeyed to when he received the Covenant of the Law, the Ten Commandments. In Moses' time this mountain was called Sinai. In Elijah's time it was called Horeb. God gave Elijah the food he needed to journey to this mountain.

On Mount Horeb Elijah received instructions to anoint Hazael to be King of Aram, Jehu to be King of Israel and Elisha to be the prophet who would continue after him. Like Elijah in the desert, there are times that all of us feel so spiritually drained that we wonder whether or not we have the stamina to complete the particular mission the Lord has for us. There is a mountain we have to journey to, a mountain we have to climb. The mountain is God's unique plan for each of us. There is a mystery in that although the plan is unique, it encompasses a position in life that we share with many people. For example, many people are called to be parents, but each person is called to be a parent in a unique way.

The same can be said for all vocations in life. The plan is a mountain. The journey is our lives. It takes a tremendous amount of strength and determination to be a good husband or good wife, a good parent and even a good child, a good priest, or a good Teen. It takes a great effort to be a true follower of Christ. It takes a tremendous determination to allow God's plan for us to take place. It is much easier to just give up. All of us know about people who leave their responsibilities because it was just too draining for them. I am sure that all Moms and Dads feel pushed to the limit by the children, but it is sad to learn about some parents who just stop putting any energy into raising their children. The same thing can be said about people who give up on the continual sacrificial love of Jesus Christ that the sacrament of matrimony demands.

The same thing can be said about priests and religious who decide that their own needs are more important than the continual demands the Lord places upon them to care for his people. Like Elijah in the desert, we often feel drained, but like Elijah in the desert, the Lord gives us the ability to complete his work. An angel of the Lord brought Elijah food and water, and he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God. We have a gift far greater than Elijah received. It is not an angel of the Lord that is telling us to take and eat. It is Jesus Christ who gives us the nourishment we need to complete the work with which we have been entrusted. And we are not given just a hearth cake and water, we are given the very Body and Blood of the Lord to help us complete the journey of the Lord. We all, myself included, need to remind ourselves of the tremendous gifts we have received from God so we are able to serve Him. We have received the gift of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word become one of us.

It is difficult for us to comprehend the depth of this gift. Like the people in the Gospel, we often treat the Lord as a great man, but nothing more than a man. Perhaps, we have overemphasized the humanity of the Lord to such a point that we overlook His divinity. Jesus is God, one with the Father and the Spirit at the creation of the universe. The whole Gospel of John was written to combat the denial of the divinity of Christ. The conclusion of this Gospel is the theme of the gospel: John 20:31--This has been written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name. He is God. And He is ours. We are not alone on our journey of life. He is with us always. But we are human. We are often drained. All of us are stretched to our limits over and over again.

But we are given food for the journey. This food is the Bread of Life, the Eucharist. Our belief in the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist begins with our recognition of his divinity. If He were not God, He could not transform bread and wine into His body and blood. us this gift which defies the limits of our rational capacity. As we come to a greater awareness that the communion we receive is the Body of Christ, we realize that this divine nourishment is far more than a meal of fellowship. This is the food that provides the spiritual strength for us to make it through the week. This is the food that helps the Mom and Dad continue to be giving to their children when they are tired. This is the food that helps the husband and wife find ways to sacrifice themselves to each other and give the world an example of the sanctity of Christian marriage.

This is the food that helps the Christian grow closer to the Lord despite physical and emotional challenges. God does not demand the impossible from us. He does not give us more than we can handle. He gives us all that we need to complete the journey of our lives to His mountain. The mountain is the goal of our lives. The mountain is the reason why He created each of us. We have to

believe in Him. We have to trust in Him. With the food that He gives us, His very body and blood, we can complete the journey: we can be good Moms and Dads, good husbands and wives, good single folk, good Christians and for some of us good priests and religious. With the nourishment He gives us, the Eucharist, we can live well and die well, for the Lord is living in us and working through us.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino, SJ