

19th Sunday Year B – Strength for the Journey

I doubt that there is anyone here who doesn't identify with Elijah in the story that we heard in the first Reading. Who is there that hasn't at times wished that he/she were dead? Or whose heart has cried out: *Lord, I have had enough!*

Elijah was **sickened** by the self-interest and corruption of the society in which he found himself. As a man of faith he was disheartened by the lack of belief he encountered on all sides.

He was **weary** of his responsibilities, of the demands constantly being put upon him, of the apparent fruitlessness of his efforts. Despite his love, his zeal, people were largely unresponsive, unappreciative.

Elijah was also weary of **himself**. Increasingly conscious of his own personal shortcomings, his uncertain faith, his failing hope, the limits of his love. *Lord, take my life, I am no better than my ancestors!*

Like him we can find ourselves oppressed and disheartened. We can be appalled at the moral degradation and selfishness in our society; we can be depressed at the realisation of our own sinfulness; we can become exhausted by the demands of our responsibilities, of those we care for, or live with. Even those we love and who love us can tire us with their needs.

At times we can find ourselves saying: 'What is the point of all my efforts? How long is this going to carry on? I'm not sure I can take much more of it.' We echo the anguished cry of the prophet: *Lord, I have had enough!*

In the story of Elijah an angel tells him to eat the food that God has provided *or else the journey will be too long for you*, and we hear how, strengthened and sustained by this holy meal, Elijah is able to complete his passage to the heart of God.

This Old Testament tale has two lessons for us:

1. The demands of our journey to God are great and it is only if we are sustained by spiritual food that we will be able to keep going in the faith, hope and love which will bring us into God's presence.

2. Despite our shortcomings and our sinfulness; despite the fact that, indeed, we are *no better than our ancestors*, we are still invited to eat of the food God has provided.

For us that food is the Eucharist – and it is for the weak, for the fainthearted, for the doubter, for the one who has failed or is failing in faith, hope or love. It is for the one who, like Elijah, has ‘given up on themselves’.

In today’s Mass the words of the Psalm invite us to *Taste and see that the Lord is good...Let your faces not be abashed...The poor man called and the Lord heard him and rescued him from all his distress.*

In our time the Church has encouraged us to receive Holy Communion frequently – as often as we are at Mass – and has deliberately reduced the prescription of fasting so as to assist us in approaching this sacrament regularly. The words spoken by our Lord should echo in our hearts: *Come to me all who who labour and are burdened... This is the bread come down from heaven that a man may eat of it and not die.*

There are only two good reasons nowadays for people to stay away from receiving this ‘food for the journey’.

One is if they are conscious of being in a state of serious sin – and the remedy for this is to be found in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in a personal, sincere and humble confession where the loving welcome of the Lord will be found.

The other is when someone is in a marital union that is considered unlawful in the eyes of the Church. Often such people are among the most committed of the faithful, but the official position has remained hard line. This is so because of the high regard the Church has for the dignity and value of the Sacrament of Matrimony. But such an inflexible stance also effectively denies to many truly devout people the opportunity to rebuild their lives with the full blessing of the community of the Church in receiving the Eucharist. Despite repeated pleas from pastoral clergy and representations from Episcopal Conferences a fresh approach is still awaited from Vatican officialdom - although Holy Father Francis has led the way in his encyclical *Amoris Laetitia*!

As we recall the words of our Lord *come to me all you who labour and are burdened* we should pray for those who are in grave sin that they may return in trust to the seat of grace.

And as we hear again Jesus’ declaration that *this is the bread come down from heaven that a man may of it and live* we should pray for the Teaching Authority of the Church, the ‘Magisterium’, to engage in finding a good way to respond to the distress of some of its most faithful sons and daughters and somehow facilitate their return to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.