

Homily 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (12.8.18)

The Eucharist 'Strength for today & bright hope for tomorrow ...'

I love that story of Elijah. And of course, it's quite a long story, and we only get a snippet. And it's like really like a kind of a parable of things that can happen in our lives. Even though it comes from the ancient mists of time, you can relate to it so easily in modern-day terms. What you don't realise is prior to this, Elijah had been hounded out of Israel by Jezebel and all his enemies, with a view to killing him. And he escaped here into the wilderness, which is a very symbolic thing in its own right, isn't it? That often we find ourselves in the wilderness in relation to others and to the meaning of life. And what does he do? He gets deeply depressed, and despairs.

"Take my life, Lord, I'm no better than any of them."

And he's deeply depressed. And he can't eat, you can't eat when you're depressed, can you? Well, you have to. You have to force yourself to survive. You need nourishment to survive. But the food tastes like ashes, it's terrible. You've no appetite. And if anybody's been there, I've certainly been there, it's very hard to even prepare a meal when you're in that condition.

And yet, God knew he needed strength and we do need strength to go through this period, and this angel, which we don't really see him recognising, he just hears the voice, "Eat, else you won't have enough sustenance to get going."

He makes him do it twice, he forces him and then it said he, with this sustenance of that food, he walked 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb.

And of course, at Mount Horeb two great things happen. He's told to go to the entrance of the cave, and God will pass by with his back to him, because nobody can see God and live. It's a euphemism for how God would show himself without killing his creature. And we have the fire and we have the thunderstorm and then we have the still, small voice, and that's when the hairs of the neck and the hands of Elijah go up and he has to cover his face because God is in this presence. And then he gets his new commission. He says, "Go back to Israel. There are 6,000 haven't given in to the worship of Baal, who you will find who will support you."

And you know, that, to me, is a very powerful symbol. The Bible often uses the number 40 to mean a long time. Had he not eaten that food, he would have not got to Horeb, and it took a long time, 40 days and 40 nights, and that can be a powerful symbol for the length of depression, or when we're struggling with life or difficulty, sometimes it's a long time. But we need that sustenance to get to Horeb. If we refuse to take it we will never have the energy.

When he got to Horeb, of course, he found things were different than he'd understood, that not everybody had abandoned God. His mission hadn't failed. He thought his whole life was purposeless, his whole job as a prophet, useless. And now he finds it reaffirmed and he finds that there are people willing to support him.

Sometimes we need to know that, that when we're travelling that 40 days and 40 nights, we can't see the end. We can't know everything. We can't know that at the end of this there will be a revelation and an opening up of our hearts. And at one level that's just the physicality of living, and I find it strange when you understand this, and we do all relate to this, because we've all been there in some way, whether it be through bereavement or tragedy or difficulty or finance, any loss like loss of a spouse or whatever. We've all been in the dark side of life. And yet along comes Jesus and says, "I am the bread of life."

And maybe we take this sustenance for granted. I've found it very interesting that there's a study day where a theologian is talking to the priests about the Eucharist and the title of his study day is "familiarity breeds contempt". And you can already tell his theme, can't you, that he's saying we take things for granted and become too blasé about it, maybe.

But Jesus is present you know, when he says, "I am the living bread come down from heaven," it's his way and the church has expressed it in other ways, of saying his very transcended, resurrected life is given to us. And we need this sustenance on our spiritual journey, especially if we are to travel through 40 days and 40 nights of darkness. And, you know, I don't think we really understand why the church is so insistent that there is such a thing as obligation, obligation to attend Mass on Sunday under penalty of grave sin. Why would it impose such a thing? Because it knows, the church knows that to absent ourselves purposely from this is as bad as not eating when we're depressed.

It's to cut ourselves off from the sustenance that would carry us through the journey and that would take us, even if there's lots of nights and days that are dark, would take us to a revelation. Now, we might not always in that sustenance of the Eucharist feel presence, but God is promising us that that sustenance will carry us to the next mile, to Mount Horeb. It will support us, it will feed us, even though we can't see everything, we can't see the end, we can't see the revelation of God's presence always, or the fact that there are people to support us.

But it's so important to take into account this meaning from Elijah and see how much more does the Eucharist mean on the spiritual journey. Even attendance at Mass, if you don't even feel like eating, is joining like when you do with friends and you say you're not well and you don't eat much, but you entertain, you let them, you prepare the food. It's about being involved in the community meal. And that meal weekly is the minimum we

need week by week to flow into work, to flow back from work and it's given to us to appreciate its true strength.