

Homily
August 11, 2024
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
22:20 – 31:55

I am sure that you know and have noticed repeatedly that the Mass has many, many words. Some are most memorable. Such as the words of Consecration, which are so powerful and easily remembered. But there are others that can get missed. Even misunderstood.

For instance, the presider's prayer after the Our Father. Listen to it. "Deliver us Lord we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that by the help of your mercy we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope, the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

Hmm. When I hear that prayer the first thing that comes to my mind is, "Peace in our days?" Seems awfully elusive, if not impossible. And though we believe in God's mercy, his compassion, his providence in our lives, we are still sinners and are at times distressed, discouraged. The lack of peace, the reality of sin and life's distresses are real. But the question is: **do they conquer us?**

I believe that this prayer actually offers a theologically comforting truth: through God's compassion, providence and presence, we are free from being overwhelmed or conquered by sin. We can find safety in our God and not abandon ourselves to periodic distress. And through these we do find peace while we await the blessed hope, the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In our First Reading today, we find Elijah sitting under the broom tree. (Like dressed sycamores, I've never had a clear vision of what a broom tree looks like. Kind of like one of those displays at the store where there are just brooms hanging everywhere?)

Elijah is not at peace. He's running from Queen Jezebel and her sinful followers. He is clearly distressed, discouraged. Why? Well, not only because of Jezebel and her followers seeking to kill him. Let's put it in the context of what has gone before, which the Lectionary does not give us today.

What preceded his present condition was his triumph over gods Baal and Ashera. God made himself known by accepting the sacrifice of Elijah, after the gods Baal and Ashera were shown to be inadequate, hollow – fake. And then the destruction of the prophets of those gods, who had killed all of the prophets of Israel except Elijah, are destroyed – a direct result of this powerful moment. And in addition, immediately afterwards, God sends rain to bring an end to a long drought.

All of these marvels are the fulfillment of Elijah's ministry for God. One would think that he would be elated. But he has fled south, where we find him under the broom tree – overwhelmed, tired, discouraged. It seems he will have no peace. And so he asks to die. To be folded into the death of his ancestors.

We see him fall asleep, under that broom tree. Sheltered from the sun, an angel of God provides him food and drink, welcome relief from the drought and the famine. God shows that he is present to Elijah's discouragement. And then, fed by the angel a second time, he is so well-nourished that he undertakes the 40-day journey to Horeb, that is Mount Sinai. That's where our reading ends.

But just as our Lectionary reading did not provide the events before Elijah's situation, so it does not provide us the end of this story. In what follows our reading, Elijah is heading for an encounter with God. This encounter will parallel Elijah's ancient ancestors.

The Israelites had met God at Sinai. They had wandered for 40 years in the desert, Elijah for 40 days. And both these ancestors and Elijah were fed by God in the course of their journey.

So Elijah will encounter God on Sinai. But not in fire, earthquake or driving wind as his ancestors did at this very mountain, centuries before. No. God becomes present and active in the tiniest of whispers.

Elijah is then instructed that there are still faithful people in Israel and that God has further important things for him to do. And so he sends him back.

All of this shows that Elijah's discouragement was not completely appropriate. Very human, yes. But not long-lasting.

As always, there is a connection between the First Reading and the Gospel on Sundays. What is that connection to John's Gospel account today? God provided energy to Elijah and direction to this weakened and discouraged man. Even as God had provided energy and direction to the Israelites during their years of wandering.

Likewise, through the Eucharist, the Bread of Life – Jesus - provides vitality and meaning to us, weak and frightened followers though we often are. He is the bread of life, God's ongoing self-revelation of care for us, no matter the circumstances.

Brothers and sisters, we all sit at times with Elijah under the broom tree, thinking or saying, "This is enough, Lord. Let me go." But the same God that took care of Elijah and brought him to a deeper level of knowledge of God, also takes care of us and leads us through Christ into a closer encounter with his goodness and a deeper knowledge of his love each week when we gather.

Perhaps after we are so well-fed by the word and Eucharist today, some time during this week we will bring our discouragement, our being overwhelmed, to our God.

And so let us join Elijah in the full journey – through triumph, through discouragement, to enlivening encounter with God.

Then go back to the Psalm today, Psalm 34.

And in your hearts, taste and see the goodness of our God.