

Homily for 19th Sunday B, St Ignatius. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan.

That gospel reminds us in so many ways of what we are doing right now – preparing to eat that bread which is Christ’s body. Yes, the communion, and we prepare for that by a confession of sin. You should not doubt that this prayer brings about forgiveness. Indeed, the whole Mass does, if devoutly prayed. Think of one prayer still to come: “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” Pray it, believe it! The gospel sounds familiar – and wonderful. We need only one comment from the scholars – that the living bread, the bread come down from heaven, also means the word of God. It is living by that word, as Jesus taught it, that we come to eternal life.

For example: the passage from St. Paul today is part of the inspired word, and it makes a great examination of conscience. We DON’T always get rid of all bitterness, passion, anger; we are not always compassionate and forgiving-- even though God has forgiven us.

But what are we to make of that first reading, which seems the stuff of legend? No angel comes to us with free food and drink, and probably did not come to Elijah. Stories, legends, or myths in the bible and elsewhere are often told to illustrate a deep truth about God and the human condition. Remember St Christopher, whom the church finally said never existed? But the story remains as a sign of compassion, and divine providence. It is God who is the beginning and end of our journey and our companion as we go. So a devotion to Saint Christopher reminds us, even now, of God’s caring love.

The story of Elijah is something like that—a legend woven around a fact. There *was* a real Elijah. There was also a real Jezebel; the name has come down to us as synonymous with a “wicked woman.” She was the queen, and had just tried to have Elijah murdered. What happened then; did he flee to the desert, did the angel come with food and drink, and all the rest?

It is safe to say, with scholars’ help, that the story is embroidered to bring out a point. The clue pointing to a deeper truth is the use of the number forty. The authors of the Elijah story wish to remind Israel of their desert experience when, for forty years, they endured great hardships, were rescued from starvation by a sudden supply of quail and manna, and finally were enabled to finish the journey and enter the promised land. Exodus is the great theme of the Jewish and Christian religions. More than a theme, it is like a schema or model of the way God interacts with us. He is with us to set us free, free from all bondage, even death. This is the great exodus which Jesus carried out in his own person. The promised land for us is not a country but --as we heard today - eternal life.

It is not necessary to take the scholarly explanation to profit from the Elijah story. But it is important to know this deeper explanation because God’s deliverance of his people is a supremely important part of revelation. And we are free to take the story of the prophet and update it, so to speak, to consider it as reflecting our own story. Each one of us is given this life to help bring about God’s reign, and to achieve our salvation, to make our way to God. Along the way we do indeed run into difficulties and get discouraged, perhaps even to the point of giving up, like

Elijah. No angels come. But angel means “messenger,” and there are many who help us along the way who are God’s messengers whether they know it or not. It is not a hearthcake or jug of water that they bring. It may be food and drink but it is always friendship, love, support and encouragement. All these are signs of a saving love which enables us to go on.

Elijah is discouraged unto death; he cannot go it alone. None of us can. That is why Christ continues to be our companion. There is a lovely poem by the late Grace Noll Crowell which speaks of God’s presence at times of great sorrow or weariness. The genius of the poem is that it simply gives an invitation to “be still, and know that I am God.” Learn that you are not abandoned, that there is a power who can raise you up. The author of the poem simply called it “For One who is Tired” And she wrote:

**Dear child, God does not say today, “Be strong.”
He knows your strength is spent; He knows how long
The road has been, how weary you have grown,
For He who walked the earthly roads alone,
Each bogging lowland, and each rugged hill,
Can understand, and so He says, “Be still,
And know that I am God.” The hour is late,
And you must rest awhile, and you must wait
Until life’s empty reservoirs fill up
As slow rain fills an empty upturned cup.
Hold up your cup, dear child, for God to fill,
He only asks today that you be still.**