

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 19th SUNDAY (B)

I Kings 19:4-8 Psalm 34 Ephesians 4: 30-5:2 John 6: 41-51

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: We have just posted on our web page a review of, *The Priesthood of the Faithful: Key to a Living Church*, by Paul J. Philibert, O.P. Go to <https://www.PreacherExchange.com> and click on “Book Reviews.”

We catch Elijah in the middle of a hard journey; not only a physical journey, but a spiritual one as well. He is in the desert, but what got him there? Why is he praying for death? Who prays for death, except the most desperate, when life has no more attraction, no future to hope in? As far as poor, frightened Elijah can tell, things are helpless. He cries out, “Take my life for I am no better than my fathers.”

Elijah has fled to the dessert because he is running for his life. Previously he triumphed over the prophets of the god Baal on Mount Caramel. (The story of “the dueling prophets” is a great read, I Kings 18: 20ff.). But the prophets of Baal were brought to Israel by Queen Jezebel, and she has sworn that she will have Elijah killed. So, Elijah is in the desert because he is running for his life and he is worn out and discouraged. He sees little hope for himself or his prophetic mission. He has had enough of this prophesying business and wants to die!

The story of Elijah is reminiscent of the Israelites in Egyptian slavery, who also had no hope, until God stepped in to save them. God took the Israelites into the desert where, through their hardships, they learned more about their God – which is what is about to happen to Elijah. The author of I Kings links the story of Elijah with that of the Israelites in the desert in several ways: he complains to God; is fed bread in the desert and needs to continue the arduous journey. Notice too that Elijah walks 40 days and 40 nights to God’s mountain, which ties the story to the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert.

Can you hear the underlying call in the Elijah story to trust in our gracious God? Elijah’s problems didn’t evaporate, he still had a long way to go on his journey and, while there would be more trials up ahead, God would be with him and strength would be given him for his task – beginning with the bread and water right before his eyes.

Even today people can identify with the Israelites and Elijah in the desert. In every generation peoples' lives are difficult and they find it hard to survive. These days the financial crisis has spread out that feeling of desperation, even to those who previously felt secure. Like Elijah many are in the midst of fear, isolation and discouragement.

The angel has had to direct Elijah to the food that was right there in front of him. I wonder what food God is giving us at this stage of our journey? What gift of strength and nourishment is right in front of us that we fail to recognize? Is it the loving and patient spouse; a faithful friend; the helpful colleague or a mentor at work; the teacher who spends extra time with us; the compassionate doctor or nurse; the relative who lends us money to see us through hard times, etc.? God feeds us in the desert in such ordinary ways; the way Elijah was fed with a "hearth cake and a jug of water." We pray at this Eucharist to have our eyes opened so that we can see God's nourishment right before our eyes. When our eyes are opened to that food we will come to know again "the bread of life" of our all-nourishing God.

These past three weeks we have been hearing from John 6 the "Bread of Life Discourse." So far, the subject of the discourse has been faith in Jesus. The gospel does not yet speak of the Eucharistic bread – the last verse in today's gospel will make the transition to the Eucharist and the next section of the discourse. At this point though the question is: do we have faith in Jesus? If our answer is "yes," the subsequent question is: how does our faith affect our daily lives? Are we different people because we believe in Jesus?

Jesus calls himself the "bread of life." Is he talking about "life" in general – eating, sleeping, breathing – daily existence? I don't think so. I think he is the bread that nourishes us to live a very particular kind of "life" – his life. And we can't live that life on our own, because he asks us to die to our way of living and take up his life: the life of forgiveness, goodness, trust and service. But Jesus reminds us that God has "drawn" us to him in faith and so faith in Jesus and his words will sustain us.

He is the "bread" of a new kind of life, a life we cannot earn on our own, but is given us by the one he calls "the Father," the parent who always feeds hungry children. God loves all people; all are God's children. Yet, we have been gifted with faith in Jesus, called to live his life in the world. How will we live that life? The readings assure us today that we have not been left on our own in the desert;

but our companion is the One who nourishes and sustains us each step of the way.

The faith we have been given is not meant just for ourselves. We have the responsibility to live and share that faith in words and concrete actions. God feeds the Israelites and Elijah in desert places. Jesus does the same for the crowds. That's good, because that's where we need food at the times and in the places we can't provide it on our own. How does Jesus nourish us? ...by his teachings and by his life, which he freely gives to us.

We often think of the Christian life as requiring a lot from us – and it does. It asks our very life. But before we can do anything we are reminded today that God has the key role in today's readings. God has sent the Word made flesh, Jesus, to us and God draws us to him and through him to God's very self. For those who respond to that invitation to faith in Jesus, God gives us the food we desert travelers need, "the Bread of life."

Faith in Jesus does not begin by assenting to dogma or doctrines. It is not primarily an intellectual exercise. Rather, judging from today's gospel reading, Jesus invites us, first of all, into a personal relationship with him. "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life." Our faith in Jesus is a personal conviction, that in him, our loving God has shared our life; revealed an immense love for us; will not let go of us; or let us down when we hunger and wander in the desert. Faith in Jesus, "the bread of life" does not guarantee an easy road for us, but it does assure us of God's life within us and gives us the strength and courage to do what we must do as Christians in the world.

At this Eucharist we celebrate the care and love God has given us in Jesus. We are thankful for the faith that enables us to know Jesus Christ and through him, to come to know the Father. The faith we share at this Eucharist does not make us better than anyone else, but it is a responsibility, calling us to be instruments of God's gracious presence in the world, signs of a God who has made a covenant of love with us that will never end.

Bread is meant to be broken. "Companion" is derived from the Latin, which suggests "the one with whom we share bread." Look around, whom do we know who is traveling through an arduous desert these days? How can we "companion," i.e. how can we break and share our bread with them? What specific "bread" do they need? The bread of compassion, understanding, encouragement, etc. Or do

they need the physical bread of food, housing, job, protection, etc. How can we provide that “bread of life” for them?

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Amen, amen, I say to you,
whoever believes has eternal life.
I am the bread of life.

Reflection:

Jesus is “the bread of life.” Our faith is a personal conviction that, in him, our God has shared our life and revealed an immense love for us. Faith in Jesus, “the bread of life,” does not guarantee an easy road for us, but it does assure us of God’s life within us. Belief in “the bread of life, Jesus, give us the strength and courage to do what we must do as Christians in the world.

So, we ask ourselves:

- What deep hunger do I feel in my life these days?
- Through whom or how do I experience Jesus feeding me in that place?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you along with all malice. And be kind to one another, compassionate...”(Ephesians 4:31)

On June 18th, at the spring meeting of the U.S. Bishops, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), called on President Barack Obama and Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform before the end of 2009. Writing on behalf of the full USCCB, Cardinal George said, "It has been clear for years that the United States immigration system requires repair and that reform legislation should not be delayed."

The Cardinal urged "respect and observance of all just laws" and said the Bishops "do not approve or encourage the illegal entry of anyone into our country." But he continued, “Only through comprehensive reform can we restore the rule of law to our nation’s immigration system. The Catholic bishops of our country stand ready

to assist in this effort.”

The Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge, Bishop of Raleigh, voiced his support of the USCCB statement. “Like my brother Bishops,” he said, “I recognize that our Church has always been blessed with the strong faith of immigrants. They continue to bring to the Church a deep and vibrant faith.”

“With my brother Bishops, I hope and pray that comprehensive immigration reform becomes a reality ever respectful of the laws of our country and the dignity of each and every person.”

<http://www.dioceseofraleigh.org/news/view.aspx?id=591>

What can I do?

- Put yourself in the place of those who come to this country to find ways to provide basic necessities for their families.
- Nurture a compassionate heart.
- Pray the following prayer for Immigrant Justice

Prayer for Immigrant Justice

Blessed are You, Lord God, King of all creation.

Through Your goodness, we live in this land that You have so richly blessed. Help us always to recognize our blessings come from You, and remind us to share them with others, especially those who come to us today from other lands.

Help us to be generous, just, and welcoming, as You have been and are generous to us.

(Justice for Immigrants Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “*People of Faith Against the Death Penalty*.” If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Elrico Fowler #0134151 (On death row since 11/14/97)
- Erroll Moses #0552017 (11/18/97)
- Michael Braxton #0043529 (11/21/97)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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