

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 19TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

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

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

One would think that fierce and unswerving loyalty to God would earn “blessings” from the Holy One. Who could have been a more loyal servant of God than Elijah? Previous to today’s selection in 1 Kings, Elijah defied king Ahab’s infidelities to God and so gained the wrath of Jezebel, the powerful queen. She was from Sidon, a pagan who brought her pagan gods and rituals with her when she married Ahab. Jezebel wanted to replace worship to the God of Israel with her own religion’s worship to Baal. But Elijah, faithful prophet of God, would not allow the people to turn away. Though he was the only surviving prophet of the Lord, he entered into a fiery contest with 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18) and after he won, had the pagan prophets killed. Jezebel was enraged and Elijah had to flee for his life. We find him today worn out and discouraged, “a day’s journey into the desert.” He was faithful to God, yet we find him praying for death.

When things are going right for us, our life running smoothly—good health, comfortable job, picture-perfect family--- we say God has blessed us. This view of blessing places God on the side of the successful. Are our successes and “blessings” really from God, or are they the result of our own hard work, luck or being born into a certain family in a prosperous country? What about those who are more than “a day’s journey into the desert”? What about those in poor health, without a job, and a less-than perfect family? Are they not “blessed” by God? How do we know where God’s favor really lies? In the depths of despair, Elijah collapses under a broom tree and prays for death. From all external appearances and judging from our usual way of measuring God’s blessings, Elijah looks very unblessed--- despite his doing exactly what he was told to do by God. But we are reminded that God is on his side after all, for the angelic visitor comes to bring him food and drink.

What a reassuring reading this is for those trying to do the right things in life— fulfill marriage commitments, live lives of integrity in the work place, raise good kids and care for aging parents. Though we want to do what we are doing, we often don’t find it very easy at all. Why isn’t God blessing us, we might ask; why is it all so hard if we are doing our best for God? In addition to all our usual obligations, we are also asked to look beyond our immediate surroundings and

daily lives to the needs of a large world, a very suffering world. We are asked to attend to the world's poor, to assist those seeking justice, to bring peace where there is civil strife, etc. Ronald Rolheiser (THE HOLY LONGING: THE SEARCH FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY) sums up these justice requirements when he says:

The quality of our faith depends upon the character of justice in the land, and the character of justice is to be measured by how we treat the three groups—widows, orphans and foreigners (those with the least status in society).

Thus, for the Jewish prophets, our standing with God depends on where we stand with the poor, and no private faith and piety, be they ever so pure and sincere, can soften that edict.” (page 175)

In addition, we are becoming more and more aware that even our physical earth has rights and needs that have to be respected by us all. Looking over all that is expected of us we can say, “That’s a lot!” All in all, we believers have a big job, if we are going to be faithful to our God. Looking over our responsibilities, we are easily tempted with Elijah to profound discouragement, especially when things are not going well. We need a nourishment we cannot provide for ourselves if we are ever to continue the journey to “the mountain of God, Horeb” where we will finally meet our God.

What looked like defeat and the absence of God is shown not to be the case in this story. In defeat, God is very close to Elijah. So too for us; God will nourish us for the moments when we have met our limits and even experienced failure but still have to continue being faithful to God’s ways and our call as responsive believers.

The people arguing with Jesus in today’s Gospel are missing the point; they are failing to see what God is offering them in Jesus. The motif of the Exodus has been the backdrop to Chapter 6—the deliverance from slavery, the feeding in the desert, the covenant at Sinai (Horeb) and the gift of the Promise Land. Just prior to today’s passage, Jesus has reminded his audience that God fed them bread in the desert, but that now, in Jesus, God is giving them food that, unlike the desert bread, will last forever. In today’s passage, Jesus identifies himself as the bread from heaven that will give eternal life. This is the central theme of all of John’s Gospel—those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. Jesus names the bread they must eat, it is his own flesh. (During the next two Sundays we will see that these words will cause great consternation among his listeners and even result in

the loss of some of his disciples.)

Jesus is offering himself as nourishment for those who want to follow God's path. Like Elijah, we weary from our responsibilities and the thought of how much more we have to do and how much we still need to travel to the divine at Horeb. But God is offering another, longer-lasting bread in the desert, "I am the bread of life...this is the bread that comes down from heaven..." We may not have the so called "signs of God's blessings," reassurances in tangible form, that we are doing God's will and that God is with us. We may be struggling in our faith journey, but Jesus is asking us to trust in him. His powerful acts, like the feeding of the vast crowd earlier in chapter 6, are encouragements to us to place trust in him. Jesus' interrogators can't; they simply do not believe that he has, as he says, come down from heaven and that he brings God's wisdom to them. Those who accept Jesus, the wisdom of God, will know life eternal, life at its deepest levels. We will not be distracted by the fluff and transitory of daily attractions but will be able to discern in our lives what is truly nourishing and lasting. In Jesus, we are "taught by God," we have in him, a reliable word from God that, when accepted, can show us the way to eternal life.

The final verse places more emphasis on the sacramental way in which we take Jesus into our lives----through the Eucharist. We eat this bread in faith, as a real way of being united with Christ to receive life. We who have come some distance on our journey, who still have far to go, are like Elijah pausing beneath the broom tree. We may not be as profoundly discouraged as he, but nevertheless, we are in need of a lasting food to help us finish our journey. Can what looks like mere bread really bring God to us? Could a human being really be the fullest Word from God? Could partaking in the bread on our altar really bring us life eternal, when every other "reality" we experience is transitory and temporal? When all else has failed can this meal truly bring the unfading life of God to us? We believers say "yes"--God is our nourishment in the desert. We who have tried other forms of nourishment have found ourselves exhausted, our strength and determination diminished. Like Elijah, we receive bread, but unlike the temporary bread he and the Israelites ate in the desert, the bread we receive today will not run out and will continue to feed us, sustaining us till the end, for our encounter with God at Horeb.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Ronald Rolheiser, *THE HOLY LONGING: THE SEARCH FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY*, New York: Doubleday, 1999, 257 pages.

This is an excellent overview of Christian spirituality based firmly on the incarnational nature of our faith. Besides being a good read for any Christian, this book helps the preacher articulate responses to basic questions in spirituality.

QUOTABLE

“...spirituality is not about serenely picking or rationally choosing certain spiritual activities like going to church, praying or meditating, reading spiritual books, or setting off on some explicit spiritual quest. It is far more basic than that. Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality.

----page 7, Ronald Rolheiser, THE HOLY LONGING....

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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