

## Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

The feeling of today's readings is picked up quite touchingly in the scene about Elijah which the church offers us in the First Reading. Elijah has spent his life defending the faith of Israel against the inroads of the dominant surrounding cultures. Israel believed in a God who hears the cry of the poor, a God who liberates those caught in slavery, whereas the gods of the surrounding nations were manufactured to support the ruling powers in their position, their power and their wealth. For all his energy and commitment, Elijah longed to experience an intimate encounter with the God to whom he had dedicated his life. His name, Elijah, means 'my God is Yahweh'. To see God he decided to journey to the mountain of Moses' encounter with God.

The journey would take him 'forty days and forty nights'. We think of the forty years it took Moses to journey through the wilderness to the promised land. We think of the 'forty days and forty nights' when Moses encountered God on Mount Sinai. We think of the forty days and forty nights spent by Jesus in the desert, and the forty days during which he appeared to his disciples after the crucifixion. Forty is a symbol for a life's journey. It takes us all our life to reach our journey's end. Only then will we see the face of God. Our scene picks up a point along the journey when Elijah despairs of ever getting there. He has had enough. He gives up and lies down, ready to die. If this is the way you are feeling now, then this reading is for you. However, an angel wakes him with food and drink which give him the strength to continue his journey to God.

The Responsorial Psalm picks up the same theme. Like Elijah the Psalmist believes that God is the God of the poor and the humble. Like Elijah, he seeks the Lord and he exults in joy as he sings: 'I sought the Lord and he answered me; from all my terrors he set me free.' There follows one of the most beautiful lines in the psalms: 'Look towards him and be radiant!' We think of the glory of God radiating from the face of Moses as he came down from the mountain where he had been in intimate communion with God. We think of the radiance on the face of Jesus at the transfiguration. Paul tells us that if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus we will be transformed into his image as we reflect him, like a mirror (see 2Corinthians 3:17-18). Teresa of Avila tells us: 'Keep gazing upon him, he never takes his eyes off you.' The Psalm goes on to delight in the truth that no matter how difficult our situation, God is present to us to rescue us, just as God was there to give Elijah all the strength he needed to get up from his despair and continue till he reached his goal and saw the face of God. Finally we are told to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. In his First Letter, Peter quotes this verse when he writes: 'Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good' (1Peter 2:2-3).

This brings us to the Gospel. It is Jesus who promises to be with us as we find our way to the mountain where we will see God's face. He is the bread which comes down from heaven, the nourishment given us by God for our journey. No one is excluded. When Jesus says that everyone who listens to the Father comes to him, we are not to conclude that those who do not explicitly acknowledge and come to Jesus are not listening to God. Jesus is speaking to people to whom he is offering himself in person. The problem we face is that Jesus is often presented to others in a distorted way. To reject a distorted Jesus, as some people wisely do, is not to reject Jesus. It is also true that throughout history and still in our world many people live in a situation such that Jesus is not effectively offered to them at all. They may know of him, but they do not

know him and so they do not reject him. Jesus promised: 'I will draw everyone to myself'(12:32). We see him doing this during his life and he continues doing it now. Jesus is drawing everyone in this world to himself in ways that remain mysterious to us. The Father is drawing everyone to his Son. The judgment as to who is truly listening is best left to God.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as *life-giving bread*. He is offering himself as nourishment for our souls and it is through communion with him that we experience real life. He tells us that the bread that he is giving is his 'flesh'. By this he means his weakness, his vulnerability, his acceptance of the human condition with its pains and disappointments, but also with its utter dependence on the Spirit of God. It is the 'flesh' that connects us. It is the 'flesh' that draws us together in our common dependence upon God. We give our 'flesh' to someone when we give ourselves in all that it means to be part of the human condition. We give our flesh when we give our time, our activity, our energy, our work. We give our flesh when we give our real self in all its weakness. We give our flesh when we keep loving even when it causes us pain.

So here we are at various stages of our journey to the Promised Land. Jesus invites us to come as we are and he will give himself to us in communion. On the strength of this food we will be able to take the next step of love that will take us to our goal. The Father has drawn us here to be with his Son, coming to us through Word and Sacrament. Let us look upon him and be radiant.