

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**8<sup>th</sup> August 2021**

*The Reverend Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

In the last three weeks, I have been thinking a lot about the prophet Elijah. It has been a time framed by significant church festivals related to the prophet.

I flew to Romania on the feast of the Holy and Glorious Prophet Elijah, as the Eastern Churches revere him. In the Eastern tradition, Elijah (sometimes also called the Thunderer) administering rain, thunder, lightning bolts and hail, is the protector of crops and patron of Air Forces. When thunder is heard, people say that Elijah is driving his chariot in heaven.

When I flew back on Friday, many Christian traditions were celebrating the Transfiguration, a meaningful appearance of Elijah in the gospel story – you might remember that Peter, James, and John saw Jesus speaking with Elijah and Moses on a mountain, at the time of the manifestation of Christ's glory. While waiting for my flight, I read one of the lessons set for Morning Prayer on the feast of the Transfiguration, from the Book of Ecclesiasticus: "Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch. [...] By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire. How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! Whose glory is equal to yours? [...] You were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire."

Elijah the prophet seems filled with divine energy, throughout his life. He was a prophet of unwavering fidelity to God's word, of uncompromising faith, which is encapsulated by his name that means "My God is Yahweh". I suspect he was not a very likeable character – after all, a prophet's calling is not to be agreeable – his life was strewn with conflict, it was an arduous journey filled with peril and terror.

I must admit that I generally don't linger on the drama of his life story, nor am I impressed by his pyrotechnics, as summarised by Ecclesiasticus. On the

contrary, this morning's reading is one of my favourite moments of Elijah's journey, together with two other vignettes. The three of them are instances of Elijah being fed. Quite unspectacular! But so meaningful. All three episodes happened during times of tribulation in the midst of Elijah's epic conflict with King Ahab, who was described as doing "evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:31), and his Phoenician wife Jezebel who wanted to convert Israel to worshipping the deities of her native land, and who threatened to execute all those who refused to do it.

On the first occasion, while in a hiding-place by a brook beyond the Jordan, Elijah was fed by ravens, who brought him bread and meat day and night. Later, when the brook dried up, God sent the prophet to Zarephath, in hostile Phoenician territory, to a widow awaiting death from starvation. At Elijah's request, she prepared bread for him with her last measure of flour and the last drops of oil. Through his prayer, the widow's scanty store supported Elijah and her family for about two years.

There is much to learn, with humility, when one is ministered to by those one considers to be ritually unclean or enemies.

This morning, once again, Elijah is on the run. He has climbed down Mount Carmel after a dramatic and violent victory over Jezebel's camp, but he is under the threat of being killed by the queen's men. He flees into the wilderness. Here we find him, at the end of his strength, utterly disconsolate, literally asking God to take away his life, so that he won't have to face the hardship of another day. Many of us could recall at least once in our lives when we have been in the wilderness of utter loss, failure, burnout, hopelessness. If there is a moment in Elijah's story that countless people could identify with, this is the one. This is more than a moment of despair and exhaustion. It is the realisation of utter vulnerability. It is existential anxiety.

God's answer to Elijah's prayer is much more than a word of encouragement, and certainly no assurance that life is going to be easy. God reaches out to him: Elijah is ministered to in the wilderness in a gentle and moving encounter. 'The angel of the LORD came to him, [with bread and water,] touched him, and said: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."' God reaches out to Elijah and provides food for the journey that has to be undertaken, there is no opting out. There will be mountaintop experiences, memorable and elating, but in between much time will be spent in the wilderness.

Elijah himself will have to walk for forty days before reaching Mount Horeb, where he will experience again God's presence - not in the great wind, so strong that it splits mountains, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, yet in the sheer sound of silence. The gentleness of this theophany has been prepared by the gentleness of God's feeding him in the wilderness.

Get up and eat. "Taste and see that the LORD is gracious, [...] trust in him." (Psalm 34.8)

God's care shows up in our hour of need, when self-confidence and courage have deserted us. Our calling is to accept the bountiful sustenance God is giving us. Whatever the deep hunger and thirst that long to be satisfied in our lives, God knows them, and he can provide a way for grace. Only he can enter our troubled situations and minister to us, in the midst of the trouble.

He has already provided bread for our journey, the bread of life, the bread of new life, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Get up and eat. Yes, the journey is hard – Christ knows it only too well. His desire is to be our journeying bread, our comfort, our nourishment, our strength. The community called church is, at its core, a community of people who hunger for Christ's life. And also a journeying community. Our journey is, in the words of the author of the letter to the Ephesians, to be imitators of God.

I was reminded of words that are attributed to Martin Luther: "This life is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health, but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise" (*Defence and Explanation of All the Articles*).

Is this not extraordinarily presumptuous to try to imitate God? This is quite a journey to attempt to undertake! Yet take a moment to remember that Jesus himself was in the footsteps of God through this world. He prepared the path for us and offered the bread of life to sustain us and to transform us. Get up and eat. Accept what is offered to you. It is bread for the long haul.

In a few moments you will hear again that this bread of life that we receive - not only in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also in the daily relationship of love, of unity, of communion that God proposes - this bread of life is given not only for you, but also for many. It is bread of a new life that embraces all creation – we cannot claim it for ourselves. This bread is given to be shared, in each and every moment of our lives. As Elijah's prophetic calling and identity have been

re-made after he has eaten the bread that God had offered, likewise our calling and our identity will be re-shaped if we taste and see that the Lord is gracious.

Imitate God, share the bread of your life with all those who hunger - for physical food, for consolation, for justice, for freedom, for hospitality, for reconciliation, for truth. Provide bread that sustains their journey.

When Christ comes to dwell in us as the bread of eternal life, feed on him in your hearts with faith and thanksgiving.

Amen.