

19th Sunday
8/11/2024

WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT, BREAD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

A–Elijah was the first and mightiest of all the prophets. He was a courageous and strong man.

1–He didn't hesitate to call out the king when the king did wrong.

2–He called the people of Israel away from idolatry and back to worship of the living God.

3–Elijah was definitely someone you didn't want to have mad at you.

4–And yet for all his great strength and courage our first reading finds him worn out and discouraged.

5–He has just defeated 450 prophets of Jezebel, the pagan queen of Israel and she is not amused.

6–Elijah is running for his life because she's out to kill him. He lies down discouraged, desperate, perhaps even depressed. Who wouldn't be?

7–Elijah isn't suicidal but he makes it clear that would welcome death. At this point for him, death seems like a solution.

8–Then something happens. He's awakened by an angel who speaks a word to him and he eats the bread given him. Elijah does that but goes back to sleep. All this happens a second time and he gains strength.

9–He is strengthened by a word of encouragement and what you could call, bread of encouragement.

10–Thus nourished, he travels to Mount Horeb which is another name for Mount Sinai where, centuries before, the people received the Ten Commandments and entered into a deep relationship, a covenant with God.

11–There God will reveal himself to Elijah, he will be strengthened and God sends him back renewed to continue the work God has given him.

B–All this leads to a question: What does any of what happened to Elijah so many years ago, have to do with us and how we live our lives today? Well, a lot. Both on a personal level and a societal level.

C—Personally, all of us, even the strongest and bravest, can face times of discouragement and desperation.

1—But the consolation Elijah experienced under the broom tree is something we can experience in a deeper way at every celebration of the Eucharist.

2—At every Mass, we take the time to listen to God’s word, hopefully with an open mind and an open heart.

3—Here we receive a word of encouragement, even if at times, it is a challenging word.

4—The word, “encouragement”, literally means to put in courage but it doesn’t stop there.

5—Elijah also received bread for the journey, bread *for* life, bread of encouragement but here in the Eucharist, we receive Jesus Christ himself, the bread *of* life, the living bread come down from heaven that we might have eternal life.

6—Here, Jesus draws close to us, scandalously close, so close to us that some people have a hard time believing in it.

7—At the Eucharist, we have the liturgy or service of the word followed by the liturgy of the Eucharist. Here we receive a word of encouragement, God’s word and the bread of encouragement which isn’t a what but a who, Jesus.

8—On the Cross, Jesus overcame death and restored life. It wasn’t on Mount Sinai but Mount Calvary that he established the new and everlasting covenant. Through this covenant, made present and renewed, every time we celebrate the Eucharist, Jesus continues to feed us with himself.

9—That bread of encouragement is also the bread of hope, of our hope which works against the temptation to desperation and despair that we can sometimes face.

D—On a societal level, perhaps at times because of stress, discouragement, desperation or maybe even despair, like Elijah, some sectors of society might start to see death as a solution.

- 1–St. John Paul II warned against a “culture of death” where *Powerful cultural, economic and political currents... excessively concerned with efficiency* can lead to a war of the powerful against the weak.
 - 2–Singing the same song in a different key, Pope Francis warns a throwaway culture.
 - 3–Many years ago I saw a bumper sticker that said, *Lord, keep us from killing the inconvenient*. In a nutshell, that’s what a culture of death does.
 - 4–The inconvenient may include unborn human life, the severely handicapped, those on death row, the terminally ill and many others.
 - 5–Jesus says, *I am the Bread of Life, the living bread and the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world*. He says that whoever believes in him, *has eternal life*. He is the gospel of life.
 - 6–Jesus speaks a word of encouragement not just to us individually but to our world but Jesus does more than speak the word of God as did the prophets of old, *Jesus is the word* God speaks to us who gifts himself to us, who can give us hope as a society even in troubling times.
 - 7–Rather than looking toward death as a solution or throwing people away, through Jesus we see a culture of life that stands in contrast to a culture of death; a culture that sees every human life as a unique an unrepeatable gift of God.
- E–As we journey through the ups and downs of life including the valleys of discouragement and even desperation, with lives of intentional faith, may we always be open to the word of encouragement that Jesus gives to us and be nourished by bread of encouragement that is Jesus.