



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year B-August 8th 2021

***Readings: 1 Kings 19: 4-8, Psalm 33, Ephesians 4: 30-5: 2,  
John 6: 41-51***

In the world of great religious texts there is a feature that both makes the Bible stand in a league of its own and is universally attractive. That feature is its faithful account of humanity. Herein there are no escapes into mythology. There are no hagiographic portraits of the key players. We see the heroes and heroines 'warts and all'. We do not encounter 'plaster saints' who never had a bad thought, who from womb to tomb were emulsified in their own righteousness, who always get it 'right' with a smug self-certainty. NO. Herein are real people, servants of God who fail and fall and fight back and triumph by His grace alone.

Today we continue the story of Elijah. (Those of you who know me well will be familiar with the fact that my desk is dominated by a large ikon of Elijah. I have him there not because we are alike but as inspiration. He - the great public challenger of the cruel tyrannies of paganism and idolatry and master of the ascetic and the wilderness. Me – a small, careful voice in an unregarded backwater, physically over-indulged and utterly lost if too far from Waitrose.)

We think of Elijah as indefatigable but here we meet him at his lowest. Elijah is utterly depressed and wants to die. Given the context, this is

seemingly little short of astonishing. He has, after all, just completed the great victory of God over the priests of paganism and the whole state establishment at Carmel. The response of the authorities is not to repent but to seek his life. So here he is, once again fugitive, tucked up in the desert, waiting for the endgame to unfold. He turns to God. 'Let me die.' Elijah is, understandably, depressed. Today he would probably be diagnosed as having mental health issues and sent for counselling or commended to a branch of Dignity for assisted suicide.

I need hardly add that this is not the Lord's prescription for this bleakness.

The situation is grim – no doubt. The lifetime battle with the forces of wickedness and paganism in the land has, for all the triumph of Carmel, been consistently lost. The nation is, courtesy of its longstanding corrupt and corrupting establishment, effectively apostate. The Lord tells Elijah that he is not the only one left – as he has dramatically claimed – there are 7,000 others, secret servants of the one true God. This is scarcely a 'whoopie' moment. 7,000 is a tiny percentage but we know, historically, that the Lord can do more with less.

Far from patting a disconsolate Elijah on the head and sympathising, the Lord invokes action. (Depression feeds on sloth and accidie).

First of all He feeds him – the bread of angels will always sustain the weary pilgrim, however dark the road.

Then He sends Elijah back – back to Horeb, back to Sinai, back to the mountain of encounter where Moses stood before the Lord and received the marching orders for the people of God. He is sent back to the roots, the fundamentals, the foundations of the revelation that has born the people of God. From that high place and the subsequent encounter, theophany, Elijah will have his perspective restored and look over history and view the 'long game of God'.

Only then will Elijah be given his final tasks – raising up in secret and preparing the future by anointing and training his successor, Elisha, and the future king of Israel. Much to be done before he is allowed the privilege of the Ascent.

The pattern is no different for us. It is no good sitting weeping in the wadi, bemoaning the collapse of Western Christendom before the cruel fantasies of paganism in high places. We must be still about God's business – even when it feels that we are 'the only one left' and, in truth, there are but a few more. Fed by the bread of angels, retracing our steps to the foundations of faith and seeking the encounter and blessing the future wherever we find the next generation of prophet, priest and king. That remains our task until we are granted the honour of the Ascent.

(If all this seems a big ask, out of the range of us ordinary folk....a story: Three weeks ago I was phoned by an old friend with whom I had worked in a previous parish for fifteen years. A quiet, un-showy person, she has had Parkinsons for seven years like me but, sadly, is much further down that unlooked for road. Every day and night is a struggle. During this time she has had to nurse her beloved husband through his mortal illness and keep watch by her children, who long ago abandoned the Faith, as their marriages failed. We talked for a long time, an exchange of the medical and the spiritual in equal degree. Was she self-pitying? No. Bereft of hope? No. How did she view the road ahead? Certainly not with equanimity but with a quiet resolve to get on with the task until the Lord called. Oh and yes, her husband had come to Faith after years of hovering benevolently on the fringe. And, a straw in the wind, her heartbroken son had come with her to church on his last visit. She would go on, fed by the bread of Heaven, returning to the fundamentals,

anointing the future. She would not see herself in such grandiose terms but that is the truth.

I put the phone down hugely strengthened by her witness. As so often in my ministry I have been amazed and humbled by the extraordinary courage of ordinary people. It was, I reflected, not just Elijah who could have learned a lot from my old friend in her quiet, unself-regarding, 'get on with it' faithfulness.

And it's the sheer unvarnished humanity of even the greatest servants of God and their recognisable solidarity with us lesser mortals that confirm the Scripture's sovereign truth and give heart to those of us still on the pilgrim way.