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Elijah's Power Food, and Ours

Biblical Reflection for 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

[Editor's note: This column appears today as ZENIT will not publish during the first two weeks of August, but wanted to make sure a reflection was available for Aug. 9. The column for Aug. 16 will appear Friday.]

TORONTO, JULY 30, 2009 (Zenit.org).- I have always loved reading the Elijah cycle in the Book of Kings. The first book, Chapter 18, portrays Elijah as an invincible prophet who fearlessly stands up to king and prophets, but he remains extremely so human in the process! Today's first reading from 1 Kings 19 presents us with the great prophet who is vulnerable and subject to discouragement and fear.

Let us situate today's story in 1 Kings. In Chapter 19 we have the aftermath of Elijah's brilliant victory in the contest with Jezebel and the priests of Baal atop Mount Carmel. Just when Elijah should have been triumphant, he receives a message telling him of Jezebel's murderous intentions, and he is "afraid" (v. 3). Elijah is persecuted for his faithfulness and for demanding total obedience to one God because such loyalty threatens the powers that be who have their own ideas about whom or what people should worship.

Israel's fiery prophet immediately flees south into the wilderness of the Negev Desert. His mood is one of defeat and desolation. After all he had done for the God of Israel, his victory now seems vitiated. He has not been given divine protection he was promised and he only wants to die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." There, in the barren desert, Elijah lies down under "a solitary broom tree" and asks God to take his life, claiming that he is no better than his fathers. Elijah bemoans his discouragement at his lack of success in encouraging the Israelites to be faithful.

Energy from above

Suddenly, a messenger (angel) of the Lord awakens him and tells him to eat and drink. Whereas the wicked Jezebel sends a messenger of death to Elijah, the Lord God of Israel sends him a messenger of life, who serves Elijah food and water, two essentials for survival in the harsh wilderness.

Elijah eats, drinks, but then falls asleep again, indicating that he has not yet recovered from his lethargy or depression. The messenger wakes Elijah again and urges him to eat and drink, this time providing a reason, "or the journey will be too much for you" (19:7).

What can we learn from Elijah in the desert wilderness? Here is a man who has given his life totally in faithfulness to the God of Israel. He has been totally "zealous for the Lord." His desperate cry, "I am no better than my ancestors" reveals a man who no longer believes in himself. He had believed himself to be a spectacularly exemplary servant of God. No one could outdo him in his zealotry. Now he believes it has been all in vain!

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Dark night of the soul

Yet the God of Israel does not give up on Elijah. God's teaching moment begins when Elijah's famed resourcefulness runs out. Angels from God are needed to feed him in his weakness. Then God leads him through a time of reflection in the wilderness.

His journeying through Negev wilderness lasts for the significant time of forty days and forty nights. As the Hebrews wandered earlier in the wilderness in search of God, this most zealous prophet and servant of the Lord is led on a similar journey. Eventually Elijah comes to the sacred mountain of Horeb, where he spends the night in a dark cave. The dark cave and the dark night are reflective of his "dark night of the soul."

Mount Horeb is in some Old Testament traditions the name for Mount Sinai, the mountain associated with God's appearance. Forty days and nights in connection with Mount Sinai recalls the two sojourns of Moses on Sinai for forty days and nights (Exodus 24:18; 34:28).

The point of this moving story is not just that Elijah makes a physical trip to Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai, but rather something much more significant. In an act of sheer grace God intervenes, provides the prophet with life-giving food and water, and suggests a pilgrimage to mountain that is the place forever associated with the source and essence of Israelite faith.

The Elijah story speaks powerfully to those who are worn-out, fearful, or in need of renewal and recommitment to their original call. The story suggests a way forward -- eat and drink of God's life-giving sustenance, return to the core of faith, listen for God's still small voice. That may be the way to find new energy, new vision, and a new sense of purpose. Elijah must learn that God is not encountered in the sound and fury of loud and spectacular events. God will not be conjured up by the zealous or boisterous activity of the prophet who now stands quiet and broken atop the Lord's mountain.

Elijah discovers that God is encountered when the activity ceases and the words stop, when the heart is sad and the stomach is filled with pangs of hunger. When Elijah's mind and heart are finally empty of ambition and self-promotion, God is ultimately heard.

Bread of Life

For Elijah, for Jesus, and for us, bread is fundamental to life. Bread stands at the center of life. Bread is life. And in today's Gospel (Jn. 6:41-51) we hear about Jesus who is the Bread of Life. Christ is life: He is the bread of life. To eat Jesus' body and to drink his blood means more than just to believe in him. The image of Jesus as the "bread of life" is at the heart of what renewal in the mystery of Christ is about.

When Jesus says that he is "the bread of life" his emphasis is not on the bread as such, but on himself as the "I" who declares it. Jesus is saying that what we long for to nourish our hungers is found in himself, the "I" who identifies his life with the bread he gives (cf. in 6:51). Jesus is more than mere bread for our bodily hunger. He is more than love to satisfy our emotional needs. He is the word that will satisfy our hunger for truth. He is bread for life itself; the total satisfaction for all our human hungers.

For all baptized believers the Eucharist is the primary way of celebrating and sustaining contact with the risen Lord. Let us consider for a moment the highly symbolic actions of Jesus as he gives us the living bread from heaven. Jesus took the bread. He has taken the bread of our lives and joined it with his own. Jesus blessed the bread. He has blessed us with his life. Baptism was the first moment of that blessing. Every other moment of contact with Jesus Christ is a deepening of that blessing.

Jesus broke the bread. Like Jesus, there are moments in our lives when we feel hurt, broken, lost, discouraged,

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disillusioned, empty, rejected and without energy and hope. We are like Elijah under the broom tree, waiting for our life to end. Yet even in these fractured moments, the Lord Jesus is present to us.

Jesus gave the bread. He gave of his time and his touch. He gave encouragement, but also his challenge. He gave both word and bread to feed and nourish. He gave most fully in giving himself. He gave till there was no more to give, declaring his life and work complete with the words, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Then bowing his head, he handed over his spirit, the same spirit he gave us when he appeared risen from the dead (cf. in 20:23).

In life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has given us a profound example, and challenges us to do the same. "Go and do likewise" is both a challenge and a commission. It is the commission to live the mystery of being bread blessed and broken for others. When life seems to be breaking apart, we should not forget the lesson of the bread broken for us. It cannot be broken without being firmly held in both hands. When it comes to the breaking of bread, or of our lives, both hold the challenge of the mystery of faith.

Let us pray that our sharing in the Eucharistic bread and wine may transform us more and more into what we eat and drink, and that we might truly become living bread, broken and shared with all people.

[The readings for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time B are 1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:30-5:2; and John 6:41-51]

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