

**Elijah's Dream**  
**St. Paul's, Milford**  
**19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Sunday 9 August 2015: 8:00 and 9:30**

The Gospel readings for these first four Sundays in August all relate to Jesus as the Bread of Life:

*I am the bread of life. Whomever comes to me will never be hungry.*

This theme is developed today in our intercessions as we reflect on the reality that the bread of life is a theme that continues to have relevance.

Now with each of these gospels comes a passage from the OT that relates in some way to it. And such is the case today.

Today we enter the foggy world of the books of the Kings. Not just the two books of the Kings, but also the two books of Samuel and the two books of the Chronicles. They more or less tell the history of Israel. But it's not pure history – I'm not sure that such a thing exists. It's history told from the point of view of the Israelites. Here we read of men like Samuel, Saul and David and Solomon and of all the kings, good and bad, of the two kingdoms formed when Israel was divided, leading up to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. Together these books represent a fair chunk of the OT.

And here today in the midst of these pages of history we have a short episode. It features Elijah, regarded as the greatest of the prophets, just as Moses is remembered as the embodiment of the Law. The Law and the Prophets; the twin foundations upon which Israel's religion was founded. Moses and Elijah. Centuries later brought together in Jesus who was the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets.

Now we could spend a lot of time on this; on the history of Israel for that matter. It's fascinating stuff, but this isn't the time. Let's content ourselves with just five verses in today's passage! Of a man who's on a journey, who falls asleep, has a dream, wakes up and goes forward on the strength of it.

In many ways it's a strange choice for a reading. The passages before it and after it seem much more significant. In the previous chapter Elijah calls down fire from heaven to demonstrate God's power over Baal. In the verses that

follow Elijah encounters God on Mount Horeb. I'm sure you'll recall that there he met God not in the earthquake, not in the wind, not in the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence, "the still small voice". That's a passage that inspires; that resonates with us. But today the lectionary asks us to pause and consider these less emphasised verses in Elijah's story and acknowledge their enduring relevance for today.

This was a time of treachery for Israel. If you read through the biblical narrative you'll find a description of each of the kings, each usually summed up with words like '*xxx did what was evil in the sight of the Lord*'. However, of this king, Ahab, the condemnation was even more acute: '*Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord than had all the kings before him*'. Worse than that, however, he was married to a particularly nasty woman. As it's written: As if all this were not enough he took as his bride Jezebel, daughter of the neighbouring king of Sidon. Her name lives in infamy. Very few people are named after her! To be a Jezebel is to be the stuff of which soap operas are written. Ahab and Jezebel. Not nice people. Ahab clearly the worst of the worse. Wickedness personified.

Now in the chapters immediately preceding our text we read that Elijah approached Ahab and warned him that a severe drought was on the way; one that would bring great hardship. A confrontation follows. The lines are drawn. Not only between Elijah and Ahab, but in fact goodness versus evil; the God of Israel against the forces of Baal. Jezebel herself is busy killing off the prophets of the Lord.

Ahab sees Elijah and asks: *Is it you, the curse of Israel?* Elijah retorts that he's not the curse of Israel; Ahab is. Elijah throws down a challenge: he will face the forces of the enemy in a contest. He challenges the people: *How long will you go limping with two different opinions?* If the Lord is God then follow him, but if Baal is then follow him! Be one thing or another; don't sit on the fence. The end result was a contest of burnt offerings. Elijah prays to the Lord: *O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me so this people may know that you are God.*

Following this trial by fire Elijah's strength seems unstoppable. He orders the slaughter of all the prophets of Baal. In the three verses that precede today's passage we're told that Ahab reports to Jezebel all that Elijah did and specifically that Elijah has killed all the prophets with the sword. Jezebel sends a messenger to Elijah with a death threat that she vows will be fulfilled in one day.

We then read: Elijah is afraid; he flees for his life and goes to Beersheba. Beersheba is under Judah's control; legally it's beyond Jezebel's reach. Elijah is utterly depressed. He's emotionally and physically exhausted. As it's written, he asked that he might die: *It's enough now O Lord; take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.* Then he lies down under a tree and falls asleep.

He's awoken; whether it be by an angel or a messenger doesn't really matter. No doubt at first he thinks the messenger is from Jezebel (she had threatened to kill him). But no, the messenger comes not from her, but from God. Not to take his life, but to nurture it with food and wine and sleep. Elijah's strength is renewed, although not his emotional strength. He sets out on his way and after forty days (that just means a long time) he arrives at Mount Horeb.

Many scholars see added significance in this episode. They see Elijah as discouraged, suffering burnout from his duties, exhibiting signs of depression. One suggests that: "God's therapy for prophetic burnout includes both the assignment of new tasks and the certain promise of a future that transcends the prophet's own success or lack of it." Another suggests that: "given his attitude one should expect a divine rebuke. There isn't one, however, but instead a series of epiphanies ... Elijah's perspective is strongly challenged and a lesson is offered to him, but he is never rebuked for showing weakness."

What Elijah receives are practical, tangible provisions that enable him to go "in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights". What is given, then, is sufficient and strengthening. Today's gospel, as we've seen, identifies Jesus as the living bread that came down from heaven. The message then is that the bread of Jesus gives us strength for the journeys in our lives, however difficult or overwhelming they may be.