

"Epitaphs for Elijah"
Homily of August 10, 2003
by Fr. Brian Joyce

Three weekends in a row where we have had the same Gospel passage scene about the Bread of Life, and we have two more weekends to go. So, I am going to talk about the first reading for a change. Now, there is a little problem with the first reading in the Mass. First of all, sometimes we arrive late or we are just getting settled. So, we don't really hear it. And, secondly, most of the year, it is from the Old Testament, from the Hebrew Scriptures. So, the figures are a lot less familiar to us than the Gospel figures.

Today's first reading is about Elijah. Elijah was a major prophet for the Jewish people about eight hundred years before the birth of Christ. And he really went to war with the pagan priests in the country at that time. And he took on the king, Ahab, and his wife, the queen, Jezibel. He became the greatest figure in the Jewish faith, after Moses. But, when we meet him in that reading today, he is exhausted. He is depressed. He is discouraged, and he is asking for one thing. He wants to die. "Bring me death, Lord. Let me die.... Enough, already!"

I have a priest friend back east. When he goes on vacation, one of the things he does is he likes to visit old cemeteries. Last year, he was in New England, and he collected the epitaphs of some of the old headstones. He wrote them down. The first one, he said he had seen many times before in old cemeteries back east. It was on several headstones in this cemetery.

Behold and see as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, so you will be.
Prepare for death, and follow me.

That's a common one. He found some that were really unique. There was a woman by the name of "Ruth" who was buried. She had been married to an "Obadiah" and someone put on the headstone,

She had lived with her husband fifty years and
Died in the confident hope of a much better life.

We trust it wasn't her husband who had designed that.

And here is another very unique one. He only came across this one once. It sounds as if it came from Madison Avenue.

Here lies Jane Smith, wife of Thomas Smith, marble cutter.

This monument was erected by her husband as a tribute to her memory, and a sample of his work. Monuments of the same style sell for \$250.

This is in the 1800's. I think the price has gone up. And just one more.... This was on a husband's tomb:

Sacred to the memory of Mr. Gerald Bates
who died August 5, 1880.
His widow, age 24,
who mourns as one who can be comforted,
lives at 7 Elm Street in the village
and possesses every qualification of the good wife.

It's kind of like before the "Dating Game."

Well, if Elijah, our prophet in the first reading today, were to die, I think his tombstone would read, "I quit!" or "Enough is enough!" or "I told you I was tired!" or "I've had it!" or, maybe more formally, "An exhausted and discouraged prophet." And what God does is give him a piece of bread and a word of encouragement. And, that's all. God does not change the situation. The King and Queen and the Royal Forces are still out to kill him. He still has to preach to disbelieving crowds. But he receives from God a piece of bread and a word of encouragement. Our God is not a magician. Our God doesn't do magic. Our God is not a fairy godmother. Our God is not a genie who comes out of a bottle and gives us three wishes. Rather, our God is a companion. In fact, the word "companion" is interesting. It comes from "bread." The word "panion" comes from "panis" for bread. We sing the song "Panis Angelicus," the heavenly bread. Or, in Spanish, we say "pan," "Pan de vida," and the Latin word for "with," the "One who breaks bread with you" or "is bread with you" is your companion. Our God is our companion, and Elijah finds out, that's enough. That's enough. With God as our companion. That's enough.

Jesus is the great witness that ours is a companion God. Jesus comes along and says, "Those who believe shall have life that really lasts.... those who believe. I was reading this week about a missionary to Africa who was asked to write, to translate the Bible for a tribe that had never heard the Bible in their own language. And, he ran into a problem because, in translating it, he found there was no word in their dialect or language for "to believe." So, he gathered the elders of the tribe and he tried to describe what we mean by "believing." And they said, "Oh, what we call that is to listen with your heart." To listen with your heart.... And that's not bad. To believe is to listen with your heart. That's true of many things. "To love" is to listen with your heart. "To trust" is to listen with your heart. When it comes to our deepest values and truths that really matter in our lives, it means we have listened with our hearts. So, that's not bad as a start for "to believe."

But believing is more than that. It means not just our hearts. It means our heads too, because we

end up with doubts and questions. We end up trying to figure things out. We build schools and colleges and universities and teach theologians because our faith is always seeking understanding. That's the way we are. So, to believe we must use our hearts and also our heads. And even that is not enough. Even that is not enough! To truly and fully believe as a people, we have to be people who listen with our hearts, who use our heads and who carry our belief in our hands. "To carry our belief in our hands" means to be people of compassion and concern and service and care to others. And if, as a people, a community, we put that together, if we are a people who listen with our hearts, but also use our heads and our hands for our belief, then Christ's words really ring true. Those who believe shall have life that really lasts.

Now, we have a great example today, of carrying our belief in our hands. We are visited by the Little Sisters of the Poor, and I am going to ask Sister Michael to come up and share with us how they carry our faith in their hands. Sister Michael....

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. We'd like to thank Father for inviting us to come to your parish. The Little Sisters of the Poor is an international congregation that was started in France in 1839, when a poor woman brought a blind, poor woman into her home and cared for her. And another came and another until the house was too small. Today, there are over three thousand Little Sisters and two hundred sixteen homes in thirty-one countries. Our home in San Francisco has been there for a hundred years. We have been on that property. We also had a home in Oakland which many of you may remember. It was next to the old Montgomery Ward building. When all the laws changed, for the requirements for nursing homes, it was impossible to rebuild both homes. So, since there was more land in San Francisco, we rebuilt on that property and we left the home in Oakland. That property was bought for us by Mr. Edward LeBrethen. We built the new house in back of the old house and knocked the old house down, which left a magnificent front yard. There is no grass in San Francisco, but we have grass.

The charism of the Little Sisters of the Poor is that of humble service to the aged poor. The two requirements to live with us are that you are old and that you are poor. We have eighty-five residents and seventy-five seniors who join us for meals and activities on different days but don't sleep at the house. We try meeting all their spiritual and physical needs to the best of our ability. We have Mass daily, the Rosary. The residents feel it is their duty to pray. They can no longer do for society. But, no matter how infirm they become, they can always pray. They take this very seriously. However, they do like to have a good time. They like to go out when the weather is nice. And you know in San Francisco, that is not very often and unpredictable. So they don't go out very often in this house. But they like to have parties. It always amazes me that those that say the dining room and chapel are too far to walk to can dance. And they dance all night and can't walk the next morning. But that's all right, as long as they know that God loves them; they know we love them. That's what is important. When they become more dependent, they are moved to the different sections of the home where there is more nursing staff to meet their needs. When they are dying, the sisters stay and pray at their bedsides. This is one of the privileges of a Little Sister. And it is very beautiful, how many of the other residents join us at this time because we are one family.

In order to meet the needs of the home two sisters go out daily asking organizations and businesses to help us with our work. If the company we go to has something we can use at the house, they give us their product. Otherwise, they give us money. And that's how the house stays open. We depend on Divine Providence. We come over to the East Bay weekly as well as going to both the produce market and the fish market in the city weekly. And they provide for all of our needs. I always say the best kept secret in the world is how many good people there are because nobody hears about them. But we witness to them every day of our lives.

We are here today to ask you for your help. If you are unprepared but you would like to help us, Sister and I will be at the entrance to the Church with envelopes that you can send in at any time. Your help is always appreciated. But we also want to ask for your prayers for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. We have between twenty-five and thirty-five young women who make perpetual profession yearly at our motherhouse. That sounds like a lot but when you remember there are over two hundred homes throughout the world, it is not enough. So, we ask for your prayers for vocations, and we assure you of ours. Mass is offered for our benefactors once a month in every home worldwide, and the Little Sisters and the residents pray for you daily. So, please do be assured of our prayers and our gratitude. Thank you and God bless you!