

COMMENTARY

Taste and See

By Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

Search your prayer books, meditate on all 20 mysteries of the rosary and comb through novenas and chaplets. Nowhere will you find the suggestion that you pray like Elijah does in today's first reading. He was basically telling God, "Enough! I've had it! Just let me lie down and die! Here and now!"

The fact that spiritual tomes don't copy that prayer for us to memorize or create hymns from it doesn't diminish the crystal quality of its honesty or the witness it bears to the profound relationship Elijah maintained with the God who had called him into a life of prophecy. When we find the "Thy will be done," of the Lord's Prayer too hard to pray, perhaps we can echo Elijah's cry and trust that God hears that prayer with compassion.

After praying, Elijah lay down, perhaps hoping never to awaken. But God's lovers don't get off so easily. Elijah had hardly gotten into deep sleep before God's messenger shook him awake and told him to eat. When Elijah tried to return to the sleep of the just, the angel told him to finish off the provisions God had sent because he needed energy for the road ahead. That long road would first take Elijah to Mount Horeb where God would appear to him. Later, it led him to where he would anoint Elisha as his successor and finally to where he would be carried off to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). According to the story, the one thing God did not do for Elijah was allow him to die.

Elijah's story seems to teach that God listens to the prayers of the beloved and answers by beckoning them toward all that life can offer. This is the message Jesus tried to convey to his companions as he described himself as the bread that comes from heaven. According to Jesus, the bread from heaven was God's offer of life more abundant than they could imagine. The people who murmured, denigrating him as nothing more than the son of their neighbors, were prisoners of their own measly expectations. They wouldn't fathom the idea that God could work through one of them — much less that their small lives could ever be worth stretching into eternity. Their refusal to accept Jesus as coming from God betrayed their lack of faith in the value and potential of their own lives and consequently their lack of faith in the God who formed them as a people in the divine image.

Jesus told his people that no one could come to him unless drawn by the Father. He wanted them to realize that the only way to understand him was to allow themselves to be in touch with their deepest human longings, the dimension of themselves which yearns for and leads to God. St. Augustine prayed in gratitude for this capacity to be open to God with the words, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Jesus' call to those who would hear him was the most open invitation he could make. In effect he was saying, "Allow yourselves to be in touch with God's spirit within you and you will realize that I am offering you living bread, my very life which brings eternal life to the world."

The Scriptures we hear this week try to awaken us to what God is offering us. Elijah is here to lead us in the kind of sincere prayer that makes us vulnerable to God's unlimited offers. The memory of the people who murmured against Jesus in the synagogue warns us against mortally diminished hopes and venial expectations. Together they urge us to allow our hearts' longing for God to lead us to receive the life God desires to share with us.

1 Kgs 19:4-8

Elijah's miserable moment under the broom bush (it's much more like a shrub than tree) comes at a key part of his saga. Just previous to this, Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal and Ashura to a contest to prove whose god was more powerful. Their respective gods were tasked with sending fire on a sacrifice which each side had prepared. The prophets of Baal shouted, danced and gyrated and some even performed self-mutilation to get their gods to answer, but all they heard were Elijah's mocking suggestions that they should yell louder in case their gods were behind the bushes tending to personal matters or off on a trip.

When their time was up, Elijah prepared his sacrifice by dousing the wood over and over again with jars of water. Of course, when Elijah calmly prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Lord sent such a blaze that it consumed not just the offering and wood but boiled away the remaining water and incinerated even the stones and dust around the sacrifice. In spite of this and other prodigious feats on behalf of the people, King Ahab still allowed wicked Queen Jezebel to threaten Elijah with death the minute she could get him under her power.

It's no wonder Elijah fled! If this was his reward for working successfully as God's messenger, he had little reason left to live. Here we meet Elijah at his lowest and loneliest. He's escaped Jezebel's realm of influence, left his servant behind and gone a full day's journey into the desert. As Jerome T. Walsh points out in his commentary on 1 Kings, Elijah's prayer of complaint amounts to the accusation that God had asked too much of him. Elijah hands God a choice: If God allows Elijah to die, it's an admission that God had really given him an impossible task; if Elijah lives, God will have to do more than before to accomplish the divine will. Either way, Elijah is claiming that he can't take responsibility for the outcome — he could accomplish no more than his ancestors had.

When Elijah finished that prayer, he collapsed under the broom bush. The poor man had hardly gotten into deep sleep when a stranger awakened him with a touch and instructed him to eat the bread that had mysteriously appeared near his head. Elijah did what he was told and although he attempted to return to his slumber, the visiting angel explained that sleep was not the future God had in store for him. So, Elijah ate and then set off on his 40-day trek to Horeb (Mount Sinai) where he would meet God in the gentlest of breezes.

Elijah joins us for today's liturgy because of his connection to God's gifts of bread that sustain the prophets and people of God. This part of his history, like some of his other wondrous experiences (2 Kings 4:42-44 and 1 Kings 17:9-24), are part of the lore of how God cares for the poor and needy. We are given such stories not simply because they are great adventures, but because they provide the clues that help us recognize God's action in history. They indicate the

kind of things God is known to do. These stories are part of the collective memory that Jesus wanted the Jews to ponder as they questioned whether or not he was of God.

Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Today's selections from Psalm 34 take us from praise to receiving instruction. As we repeat the refrain, we recall not only the stories of Elijah, but all the ways in which God's goodness has sustained the chosen people, including ourselves, throughout history. The image of tasting the goodness of the Lord may well remind us of how Jesus himself told his wondering disciples that his food was doing the will of God (John 4:32-34).

Singing the first strophe of today's selection invites us to savor our personal experiences of God's nourishing presence to us. Then we join together in communal thanksgiving, realizing that each person's experience builds on another's so that our song reinforces both our faith and our sense of community.

The third strophe calls us as a community to give thanks together and to never be ashamed of our need for help or forgiveness. The final strophe reminds us that just as the angel was sent to Elijah, so God continues to send messengers to those in need. We end the psalm by preparing to listen to the final repetition of the refrain as an invitation to learn from our ancestors, to learn from the prophets, the holy ones and Jesus himself how to recognize and taste the goodness of the Lord.

Eph 4:30—5:2

Today's selection from Ephesians begins with the unusual admonition: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." One of the few other instances of a phrase like this comes from Isaiah 63:10 which says that the people whom God had lifted up and carried, "rebelled and grieved his holy spirit." In Isaiah, this refers to the attitudes and actions that separated the people from their redeemer until the memory of all that God had done for them led them to repent. In Ephesians, the author spells out the activities that would "grieve" the Spirit as bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, reviling and malice.

None of those vices involve idolatry, blasphemy or apostasy. Rather than being offenses directed against God, they are behaviors that rupture the community. The implication is thus that the Spirit of God who abides in the community is actually vulnerable to the attitudes and activities that undermine the unity of the group.

Although the Greek philosophers known to the Ephesians and today's humanists have wonderful descriptions of a virtuous life (ideals and standards that could challenge Christians then and now), the rationale philosophers give for building up the community differs entirely from that of the Christians. Christians are not simply about establishing a good civil society; we believe we are called to be the living body of Christ. Therefore, every bit of our behavior either strengthens or diminishes that entire body. While Greeks strove to be ethical or virtuous individuals, the aim of Christian life is necessarily communal and has inescapable theological and moral implications because we are called to be the body of Christ.

As if that were not enough, the Letter to the Ephesians urges the community to be imitators of God. While most rational people who believe in God as the supreme Being would see that as an impossible task, the Christian community has received a unique revelation that removes that call from the realm of the superhuman and places it on the level of everyday relationships. The Christian way to imitate God is to imitate Christ whose life was lived entirely for others, who assumed humanity in order to reveal to human beings that our destiny is divine.

The list of things the author tells the community to avoid offers concrete evidence that they were far from perfect. One can assume that members of that congregation could cite instances of bitterness, anger and all the other vices in their own communal experience. That made their call to an alternative way of living all the more pointed. There's no reason to mention behaviors that are inevitable, but if you are convinced that an attitude or behavior can be overcome, then the first step is to name it, then to admit it, and finally, to determine how to eradicate it.

Perhaps a fruitful way to think about the admonition "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit," would be to interpret it as saying "Do not frustrate the Spirit's living influence among you." That becomes a call to the kind of awareness Ignatian spirituality promotes in the examen of consciousness, a tool to help us grow in awareness of the invitations and influence of the Spirit in our life and to recognize our cooperation with or resistance to them. Those who grow in awareness of the Spirit's presence will understand the Gospel statement that the Father draws people to himself through Jesus.

Jn 6:41-51

In this follow-up from last week's Gospel with Jesus and his fellow Galileans in the synagogue, the allusions to the Exodus continue. In an ironic twist of tradition, John tells us that the people "murmured against Jesus because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.'" That's an inverted echo of the Israelites who murmured about a lack of bread in Exodus 16. In last week's segment of this Gospel, the challenge for the Israelites was to understand that the manna was God's gift given through ordinary means. In today's Gospel, the challenge is to recognize God's gift in the person of Jesus.

Jesus' critics fall back into their penchant for the extraordinary. Rather than judge Jesus by how his message or works reflect God's ways, they claim he is too common to have come from God. This parallels Luke's scene in the synagogue at Nazareth when the people doubted Jesus because they thought they knew him. (See Luke 4:16-30; Matthew 13:53-58, Mark 6:1-6.)

In response to that, Jesus challenges the people to use their tradition to understand what God is offering through him. The Jews are the people with whom God has dealt directly for centuries; they of all peoples should recognize God's ways. When Jesus says that no one can come to him unless the Father draw them, he's asserting that those who truly know the Father will recognize him as the one sent by their common Father. Those who love the Father will be intuitively drawn to him.

This idea is the crux of the matter. Jesus says that the Father is the one who draws those who come to him. While the people are asking for incontrovertible signs, Jesus invites them to let

themselves be drawn, be enticed or lured by God as was Jeremiah (27:7). Quoting an idea from Isaiah (54:13), Jesus reminds his listeners that their tradition says they will be taught by God. (Jesus broadens Isaiah's prophecy; Isaiah referred to the children of Israel and Jesus says, "They shall all be taught by God.")

While Jesus is insisting that their shared tradition bears witness to him, the members of his audience are allowing themselves to be caught in a mire of their own making. On one hand they are asking for divine proof, on the other hand they resist probing and mining their tradition for the very evidence they say they want. It's as if they demand messages from heaven but they want to dictate how they will come and what they will convey.

Today's Scriptures invite us to search our hearts and to act from our deepest hopes and desires. Elijah's saga invites us to ponder both how to pray and how God responds to our prayer. Elijah tells us that there is no sentiment we need hold back in prayer. He also cautions us that God will never settle for less than all we can become. The Letter to the Ephesians reminds us that God's Spirit is active among us and that we have the power to collaborate with or to grieve the Spirit alive in the community. This week's selection from John 6 adds to Elijah's story, calling us to abandon our minimized hopes and terminal expectations so that we can be opened to God's unlimited offer of life.
