

The recent coronavirus pandemic brought us many challenges as individuals and communities, and not least to our life, faith and practice as Christians. One of the biggest and most unfortunate reactions was the fear of the virus and avoiding other people because of it. Of course, sensible precautions were necessary. But I was appalled by stories of Christian pastors who locked themselves away, hidden from their people. Some had a crisis of faith or even resigned from their ministries. For me, the closing of our churches, depriving the faithful of the sacraments, the removal of physical community fellowship that is such an important part of what being church means, was hugely difficult to cope and comply with.

Virtual and other remote forms of worship were a useful lifeline for a while, but they could not and will not ever work as a long-term substitute for a community that has been called to break bread together as the symbol and expression of its life in Christ.

As we read about Elijah today, perhaps it is encouraging to know that even great people like him knew moments of weakness, doubt and fear. But in the end, greatness comes not by avoiding the difficulties but by confronting them and overcoming them. Elijah was running away from something that was always going to follow him. Instead of granting him his wish to die, God sends him an angel with some food and drink to keep him alive. Perhaps this 'angel' may simply have been the servant that Elijah had left behind, catching up with him in anticipation of his moment of crisis. An angel can be anyone sent to help in a time of need.

God then sends Elijah far away to the south, to the mountain where Moses had once encountered God and received the commandments. There, Elijah would be strengthened, renewed and recommissioned by God, and sent back to face the mess that his nation was in, and also confront the personal danger he had left behind. The assurance that God was with him gave him the heart and motivation to carry on.

The story reminds us that prayer and faith do not remove us from the challenges and sufferings of real life. But they serve to help us through them. God calls us to live with reality, the circumstances of life on planet earth, and walks with us so that we can face them, not avoid them.

In our Gospel readings today and over the past two Sundays, (and there's still more to come!), we focus on the reality and gift of God as the giver of food for

our life, our life in God, food which is as important, if not more so, than the physical food we need for life. The food that God gives us is Jesus who provides the sustenance as well as pattern for our life. His life as spiritual food comes to us in a special way in our regular celebration of the Eucharist.

There are many names for this service, this Christian celebration and life-support. We call it Eucharist, Communion, Liturgy, the Breaking of Bread, the Lord's Supper, the Mass, each of which stress one or more of its meanings and functions. A less well-known name is the Latin word, 'Viaticum.' Viaticum simply means 'bread for the journey,' and was probably the word used for a campaigning soldier's rations in the days of the Roman Empire.

Unfortunately, since those times, viaticum has come exclusively to mean Communion for someone who is dying, part of what used to be called 'the last rites.' It was seen as the sacrament for the final days or moments of a Christian's earthly journey. But the Eucharist is meant to sustain us at every stage of life. It is always 'viaticum,' food for our earthly pilgrimage and mission. In the strength of this food, we make the journey of life to its eternal destination.

However, there are a few strings attached for those of us who are alive and well. As well as spiritual sustenance, a comfort, and hopefully, a joy that the experience of sharing in this communal celebration with our risen Lord brings, we who participate are afterwards, like Elijah, sent back to where we live and work and have our being, sent out to be the visible presence of Christ in our everyday life and to the people we meet and relate to.

I have a favourite little book on Christian living that I have often given to Confirmation candidates and others. It is a monastic rule of life that has been adapted to apply to every Christian, and is called, 'Rule for a New Brother.' Of course, it also means sister, and it is equally valuable for 'old' brothers and sisters too! It takes no more than ten minutes to read it right through. Like so many useful resources I do not have a copy here on the island, but I can quote from it almost verbatim.

It says, '*The Eucharist will be the centre and motivation of your whole life.*' The text then beautifully draws on the story of Mary Magdalene as she meets the risen Lord in the garden very early on Easter morning: '*Whenever you share in the Eucharist, it is for you always very early in the morning on the first day of the week.*' In other words, whenever we take part in this celebration, the risen

Lord comes to meet us. It is up to us to have our eyes, minds, and hearts open enough to see and welcome and receive him.

Then comes the challenge, the consequence of this regular Easter morning-style encounter. It says, *'Life drawn from the Eucharist will make all kinds of demand on you to put its meaning into effect in your daily life. In particular, the unity of all Christians, indeed, of all people, will be central to your concerns. Always support what leads to peace and brings people together; always oppose what alienates and estranges people from one another.....And remember, as you share in the breaking of the bread, you are being called to break the bread of your own life in the service of others.'*

Jesus is the Bread of life. We dare to eat this bread, and in so doing we claim a share in his calling, his self-giving service and his destiny. Today, tomorrow, every day, how will we be bread of life for others?