

11. August 2024

Do not falter along the way

1 Kgs 19:4-8

In those days, Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

In today's reading we meet again the prophet Elijah, who is often mentioned in the Scriptures. Indeed, it is not surprising that this should be the case, since he is even seen as a forerunner of the coming of Christ. In the Orthodox tradition, for example, he is venerated as such, and many holy places in Eastern Christianity are dedicated to the prophet Elijah.

Today we find him in a difficult situation where he is tired of life. This reaction is not surprising, since he felt practically alone in the face of the king's power. He was persecuted by Jezebel, the king's wife, who wanted to take revenge on him, and he had no one around to protect him. Add to this the realisation of his own limitations, as he puts it in the biblical reading: *"It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers"*.

How well we can understand the prophet! Perhaps we have experienced something similar ourselves, when the mission that awaits us seems far beyond our capacity and what we have achieved seems so imperfect. Not a few missionaries will have experienced something similar, when all their efforts seemed to bear little or no fruit; when they reached the limits of their human possibilities; when they felt powerless and perhaps even felt that it was time for it all to end...

But today's reading shows us what God can do at such times. When Elijah is "on the brink" - humanly speaking - God lifts him up. At first Elijah doesn't notice and falls asleep again, but then he listens to the Lord's instruction, regains his strength and continues his journey.

This is a wonderful lesson for us all. Sooner or later, perhaps very soon, our human strength will run out. We may have done our best to complete our task, but we have no strength left to go on, as happened to Elijah. But this is where God's grace comes to our aid, lifting us up and enabling us to go on in the strength of the Lord.

Our limbs may still feel weak and our hearts may not be filled with enthusiasm, but we continue to fulfil our mission.

In this way, today's reading becomes an invitation not to give up, but to entrust ourselves more than ever to God's grace. Although we feel "on the verge of failure", it is possible that for God this is not the end of the story. Perhaps He has allowed us to reach this point so that we can begin to live on "His food" as never before, so that we can let Him work in us, so that we do not look so much at ourselves or at what we have or have not achieved. Instead, He invites us to simply go on, like Elijah, who was given the strength to walk for forty days and forty nights until he reached the place that God had indicated to him.

In the inner life, on the spiritual path, there are similar experiences. In mysticism we speak of the "night of the senses" and the "night of the spirit". When a deeper inner life begins, i.e. when God guides the soul more directly, there usually comes a stage when we no longer act as usual on the basis of our nature, but the life of the spirit unfolds more. For the natural life this is like a night or death itself.

But even here the same applies: We must go on, comforted by the strength of the Lord, by His nourishment, which consists in doing the will of God (Jn 4:34).