

10. November 2024

Obedience to the prophets

1 Kgs 17:8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to him, "Arise, go to Zar'ephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he arose and went to Zar'ephath; and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." And she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a cruse; and now, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." And Eli'jah said to her, "Fear not; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel, "The jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth." And she went and did as Eli'jah said; and she, and he, and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord which he spoke by Eli'jah.

In Old Testament times, the prophets were of paramount importance. God was present in them, and listening to their guidance meant obeying the Lord's will. We are familiar with Jesus' lament that Israel had often not listened to its prophets (cf. Mt 23:37), who warned them of their wrongdoings, reminded them of God's rights and openly pointed out the transgressions of the people. Such warnings were always for the salvation of souls, so that they would not go astray, turn away from God and fall under the influence of their enemies.

Today's reading gives us a moving example of what happens when we listen to the prophets. The decisive act that brought lasting blessing to the widow's house is expressed in this sentence: *"She went and did as Eli'jah said"*.

The widow trusted the prophet Elijah in the midst of a very difficult situation. Apparently, her poverty was such that she thought she and her son would starve to death. Humanly speaking, it would have been understandable if, fearing for her life and that of her son, she had refused to comply with Elijah's request and pleaded with him about her desperate situation. But she did not; she simply followed the prophet's instructions. Thus the Lord's

promise was fulfilled: *"The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord which he spoke by Eli'jah"*.

This story reminds us of another well-known passage from the Old Testament. We remember the Syrian Naaman who, on the advice of his maid, set off for Israel to see the prophet Elisha and be cured of his leprosy (2 Kgs 5). When he arrived, Elisha simply sent a messenger to tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman was outraged because he had imagined that the miraculous healing would happen in some other way. At first he refused to obey the prophet's orders, but his servants urged him to do as he said. So Naaman did as Elisha said and was cleansed of his leprosy.

In this story too, listening to the prophet was crucial, even though in Naaman's case the instructions he gave him for healing seemed absurd at first. After all, he was a prophet who - if he is true - acts and speaks in the name of God. Therefore, to follow his advice is to obey the Lord Himself.

In the case of the widow of Zarephath, there is another point to consider carefully. Elijah wanted the first morsel to go to him: *"go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me"*. Since the prophet represents God, this request teaches us that we should always think of God first, because everything comes from Him.

This is a very important message that the Holy Scriptures insist on: *"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."* (Mt 6:33). Any spiritual father would also advise us to direct everything in our lives towards God. This is the case, for example, when we dedicate the first part of the day to Him, before entering into the natural course of the day.

Why is this so important? There are many reasons. We humans are forgetful, so we often forget to thank God. That is why we need to consciously remind ourselves of what it means to say 'God first'.

But the deeper reason is that in this way we enter into the order established by God: Everything comes from Him. If we turn to Him first in everything we do, then we enter into this wonderful order and consciously participate in it. This also happens when we return to God at the end of the day and offer our whole day to Him. In a way, this is what monks do at the end of the day with the liturgical prayer of Compline.

So we can draw two lessons from today's reading: 1) We must obey the true prophets; 2) We must put God first in everything.