

Homily based on the readings from August 11, 2024 (1 Kings 19.4-8; Ephesians 4.30-5.2; John 6.41-51)

The most terrifying moments in human history come when an entire nation decides to turn away from God. I am not talking about people ignoring the Lord out of laziness or indifference, but *societies* engaging in a targeted and deliberate rejection of their Christian heritage: France in 1789, Russia in 1917, Germany in 1933. This type of transition never occurs peacefully, but always results in *unimaginable* bloodshed and devastation.

Earlier this summer, I reread a book I had first discovered about twenty years ago – *The Power and the Glory*, written by the English author Graham Greene. The novel presents a fictionalized account of the period in the 1930's when Catholicism was essentially outlawed in Mexico, when priests in many parts of the country were brutally hunted down and murdered. The protagonist is actually the last surviving priest in his diocese, who struggles on a daily basis to hide from the authorities

while still fulfilling the basic responsibilities of his ministry. One of the main obstacles he faces is the fact that *wine* – which, as you may know, is essential to saying Mass – has also been banned. In the end, he willingly walks into a trap that has been set for him, because he realizes there is a dying man who needs to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The reading we just heard from the First Book of Kings presents a similar story. At this point, the ancient Kingdom of Israel – which had previously been ruled over by David and Solomon – had *fractured* into two parts: the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Northern Kingdom, under the influence of the infamous Queen Jezebel, had begun to worship a pair of pagan deities known as Baal and Asherah. At Jezebel's command, all the altars of the Lord had been destroyed and most of his prophets had been slaughtered. The Prophet Elijah was one of the last followers of God remaining in the kingdom. After publicly opposing the worshippers of Baal and Asherah, he was forced to flee for his life. As Elijah himself declares:

They have destroyed your altars and murdered your prophets by the sword. I alone remain, and they seek to take my life.

Elijah is so despondent that he actually begs the Lord to allow him to die.

God, of course, is not the giver of death but the Lord of Life. In the midst of his despair, Elijah was visited by an angel, who gave him an astoundingly simple command: “get up and eat.” The Lord had provided Elijah with “a hearth cake and a jug of water,” just as he had given manna to Elijah’s ancestors so many generations earlier. The hearth cake must *also* have possessed miraculous properties, as it allowed Elijah to journey for forty days and forty nights without stopping.

The point of this episode, though, is not Elijah’s *survival* but his *mission*. Elijah walked all the way to Mount Horeb, the very spot where the Lord had presented Moses with the Ten Commandments. There, although we

did not hear about it in today's reading, Elijah encountered the full power of the Lord – not robed in sound and fury, but in the form of a “still small voice.” This experience gave Elijah the *spiritual* strength he needed to fulfill his ministry, just as the material food had given him the *physical* strength. He returned to the Kingdom of Israel, filled with the courage and determination to overcome the ungodly forces that had overwhelmed his nation.

Left to his own devices, Elijah almost certainly would have succumbed to despair. The same would be true for *anyone* living during such an evil age. The point, though, is that the Lord will always sustain the individuals who trust in him, no matter how isolated and persecuted they find themselves.

Both the hearth cake of Elijah and the manna of the Israelites foreshadowed the *true* bread from heaven, which nourishes and strengthens all God's faithful servants. That bread, as we heard last

week, is not an *object* but a *person* – not a *what* but a *who*. As Jesus declared in today's Gospel:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven;

whoever eats this bread will live forever;

and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.

In any corner of the earth, as long as the Body of Christ is still present on our altars and in our tabernacles, we can never truly be alone, we can never truly be hopeless.

We must remember, though, that Jesus does not give his flesh *solely* for the lives of faithful *Christians*, but for the life of the *world*. Just as Elijah could not stay seated under the broom tree after he had received food from the angel, Christians today – once we have received the Body of Christ into our own bodies – cannot simply take refuge in our homes and in our churches. The point of consuming the Bread of Life is not *survival* but *mission*. No matter how forcefully society attempts to turn

away from Christ, it will be our *duty* – always and forever – to carry his presence into the world.