

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

The year is around 860BC. The place is the northern kingdom of Israel.

The kingdom is ruled by King Ahab.

Ahab is ruled by his wife and queen, Jezebel.

Under her influence, Ahab has built pagan temples and opened his palaces to the hundreds of false prophets and cronies that Jezebel has employed as part of her traveling circus.

A strange man of unknown age appears on the scene. He wears a garment of haircloth and a leather loin-cloth. His hair is so long it serves as his cloak. He is unemployed, homeless, and a bachelor. He is Elijah the Tishbite, citizen of Gilead. We don't know how, but Elijah becomes fully employed as the prophet of the God of Israel and is chosen to confront the infidelity of the monarchy. When Jezebel is off on one of her trips, Elijah challenges her prophets to a public contest on the top of Mount Carmel.

The king and the assembly of people watch the trial of strength between Elijah and all the queen's men. No voice heeds the prayers of the false prophets; but when Elijah speaks, a fire appears and burns up his offering. The crowd shouts: "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God." Meanwhile Elijah exploits his win and has all the false prophets dragged into the valley, where they are put to death. When Jezebel returns from her shopping trip to learn that her cronies have been wiped out, she sends a telegram to Elijah to say that he will join them by the following day. Elijah takes to his heels and flees into the wilderness.

The prophet makes a forty day trek across desert terrain until he reaches Mount Sinai, where Moses had first received the Law from God. Elijah wants to die; he is deeply depressed, hunted, hiding in a cave, desperately clinging to his faith in God. Then he has an extraordinary encounter with God – as we heard in the first reading. When Moses came to this place, the fire and the earthquake indicated the presence of God. Now there is a great storm involving wind and earthquake and fire. But God is not in any of these elements. The storm quietens, and there is only the sound of a gentle breeze. God comes to Elijah in a "still small voice." From now on God will not communicate through spectacular events of nature but through the word given to his chosen ones.

The wonders Elijah worked, and the extraordinary manner of his ascension to heaven, have given him a unique place in Jewish sacred tradition, which states that he will reappear to announce the arrival of the Messiah. At the circumcision of a Jewish child it is the custom to place a chair for Elijah in the belief that he will safeguard the child. At the Passover meal, an extra cup of wine is poured for Elijah and an empty chair is reserved for him. During the meal the door is flung open to let him in. And one of the songs that is sung expresses the hope:

Elijah the Prophet

Elijah the Tishbite

May he come quickly to us with the Messiah.

The belief that Elijah's coming would herald the presence of the Messiah was a belief held by all the Jews at the time of Jesus. Some wondered if John the Baptist might be Elijah; some wondered if Jesus might be. When Matthew is writing his Gospel, some fifty-five years after the completion of Jesus' mission, he expresses the Christian belief that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God.

But Matthew is facing a real problem: many of his Jewish converts feel estranged from their former partners in faith, some of them are wavering, some renounce their new Christian faith when they are excluded from the synagogue. Matthew writes his Gospel to support them in their new faith in Jesus.

The doubts that Matthew's Church is experiencing are expressed movingly in today's Gospel. Jesus is praying to his Father. His followers are separated from him. It is night. They are in a boat which is battling against a heavy sea and strong winds. Does this sound a bit like a parable for these troubled and anxious days when so much of what we have put our trust and hope in is being threatened. The boat clearly represents the church, while the night storm represents the opposition the church is facing. It is an image that has been used in art down the centuries. Jesus calls to the disciples and tells them not to be afraid, and then he comes to them over the water.

When Peter tries to do the same as Jesus, *even he* is seen to begin to doubt Jesus' power and to panic. But Jesus supports him, then asks him, "Man of little faith, why did you doubt?" The storm ceases. Now all the disciples can acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God.

When Peter "felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink." Matthew tells his struggling community that even if their faith falters and

they panic when they look at the surrounding danger, Jesus – even though he is with the Father – will come and save them. This is Gospel. This is good news indeed.

Neither Elijah nor Peter had the faith to match their zeal, but God supported both of them in their dangerous tasks. That promise is extended to all who put their faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. Often when we feel that we are battling against the odds, we wonder why Jesus always seems to be off somewhere else. And even though we know that we won't be asked to walk on water, we get that sinking feeling all the same.

In that plight we are not thrown back on our own resources. In this community gathered in faith, we have the word of God and the bread of life and the support of each other. That has to be enough to keep us afloat.