

In the last couple of weeks there has been a series of minor coincidences. Some of you know that I've been working in an antiquarian bookshop. No sooner had I finished discussing with the other staff the various ways in which clergy can be addressed when the shop door opened and in walked a splendid specimen in cassock and cincture, starched collar and biretta. A day or so later I had just finished cataloguing an obscure children's picture book (very expensive because it had illustrations by Arthur Rackham) when a customer arrived and asked if we had it – he'd loved it as a child but hadn't seen a copy in fifty years. And so on. Then two days ago there was a piece on the BBC website which mentioned an organisation called 'Elijah's Journey'. This has been set up to try to break the taboos surrounding suicide in the Orthodox Jewish community, where there is no traditional mourning for a suicide victim, the family may be ostracised and the subject cannot be mentioned. It bases its work on the story of Elijah. The founder observed that this aspect of the story isn't well-known as it is only scheduled to be read in synagogues once every twenty years or so. At least we get to hear it every three years – and here it is this morning.

Elijah is absolutely at the end of his tether. He's had it. He simply cannot go on. He's had three years struggling against King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. He prophesied a drought, which duly materialised; he had to hide in the desert, then with a widow in Zarephath whose son he miraculously brought back to life; then he staged a triumph over all the prophets of Baal and had them all slaughtered; then – having correctly prophesied the end of the drought – he ran all the way from Carmel to Jezreel in front of Ahab's chariot as the rains finally came down, and in Jezreel he was told that Jezebel intended to kill him within the next 24 hours because he had killed all her prophets. All he could do was to trudge off into the desert, sit down under a bush and say: 'OK, God – I give up. I can't do this any more. Take away my life.'

You'd have to be very callous indeed not to have some sympathy for Elijah. And given that death appeared inevitable, surely it would be preferable to have God let you die quietly, rather than to be gruesomely slaughtered by a vengeful queen. But that isn't what happened. Elijah might have given up on Ahab, but God hadn't given up on Elijah. Instead, he fed him. Again.

Elijah's career as a prophet was punctuated by heavenly gifts of food. When he first hid in the desert at the beginning of the drought, God sent ravens to bring him bread and meat. When he went to Zarephath, God provided an unending supply of flour and oil to feed him, the widow and her son. Now, for the third time, God provided bread to eat and water to drink, this time brought by an angel. Together with a decent sleep, this restored Elijah's strength to such an extent that he was able to make the long journey to Horeb, where he met God in the silence, was reassured that he was not alone, and received his next instructions. These included the appointment of a successor, so he knew his ordeal would eventually be over.

In our gospel readings for these last three weeks, and for the next two as well, Jesus repeatedly emphasises the importance of the 'bread of life'; belief in him and in the word of God as the way to salvation. Elsewhere he says: 'You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Elijah had to be in reasonable physical shape to carry out his mission, and the actual food ensured that. But the assurance, symbolised by the repeated provision of food, that God was with him and would not abandon him, that he was protected against the machinations of Ahab and Jezebel, and that he was not, in God's eyes, the failure that he felt himself to be, must have been infinitely more important.

To live by bread requires only the physical activity of getting and eating it. Your body digests it and the nourishment it provides keeps you going. No real thought or commitment is required. Living by the word is much more taxing. It isn't just a matter of listening or reading and 'digesting' – thinking about it. Academic knowledge and intellectual assent are not enough. To live by the word means that you let it guide every aspect of your life. In today's Epistle Paul sets up a template for what living by the word involves: how we are to conduct ourselves, how we should relate to others, how we should talk, work, share and forgive. It is an utterly demanding rule of life, and one at which all of us, however committed and well-intentioned, will fail repeatedly. We don't even have to contend directly with wicked monarchs and cohorts of false prophets – just with ourselves and the ordinary people and circumstances we encounter day by day. There will be times when each of us will feel that we've had enough, that we can't go on any more, that no matter how hard we try it all keeps going wrong. But that is the point where, if we give ourselves time and space, we can meet God in the silence, tell him what a mess we've made of everything and how alone we feel, and receive his forgiveness, his assurance that we are not alone, and take on board his instructions for the next stage of our journey.