

Libertyville, 26.02.2016

I Kings 19,3-16

Who in life has never gone once a trip?

It happened to me two weeks ago when I flew from Italy to come here, to Chicago, then Libertyville and finally to your church.

Even if sometimes the plane's turbulence made me a little worried, it was worth it to visit sisters and brothers in Christ and to share the joy of faith and mission.

But there are different trips, less comfortable and more turbulent, motivated by the need to escape war and persecution.

Television news show us images of people running away from Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria. Unfortunately, in many cases the Mediterranean Sea has become their coffin!!

Fleeing for economic, political and religious motives, as happened to the prophet Elijah in this passage taken from the first Kings.

He was one of the greatest prophets of Israel and the who said he was not dead, but ascended into heaven, from which he was expected to return as a sign of God's kingdom.

In this text, however, we are confronted with the prophet Elijah as a fragile and at times desperate man!

What has happened to him that is so serious as to make him wish for death?

Elijah was threatened by Queen Jezebel because he killed more than 450 priests of Baal, which the queen was devoted to.

Elijah was found to be the only one of the prophets who remained faithful to God knowing full well how important it was for Israel to make a choice between the worship of Baal and the God of Israel.

Worshiping God means to make a choice that involves our deepest values and a conception of existence different from that advocated by those who worship the dumb idols of the world.

God is the God of liberation, of mutual love and justice. This God cannot tolerate a world where there is slavery and poverty, where there is violence and injustice, where there reigns death rather than life.

Elijah understood this and decided to follow the Lord, but his choice now resulted in a situation of danger and suffering. Discouragement has taken over and the Prophet is tempted to leave his witness and the fight of faith.

He would prefer to die.

Jesus warns his disciples, then and today, those who follow his path is not easy: it is often hard, not treated with respect or even persecuted for proclaiming the gospel and for the values to which Christian faith calls us all to join.

Even, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the end of his earthly life, knew a time when he thought he would not make it.

He thought of abandoning the mission assigned to him and he said to God: "Father, if willing, remove this cup from me!" but it was only a moment, then he added, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

Well, brothers and sisters, how many times have we in our call as disciples of Christ known discouragement, suffering and been tempted to abandon mission we have received?

How many times have we thought we'd throw in the towel and stop being good Christians since it seems really difficult to carry our own crosses?

Well, we're in good company ...

Elijah, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah, even Jesus had a moment of discouragement.

Elijah, however, would even like to die and then falls asleep.

What is closer to death than sleeping?

Also you will sometimes want to sleep in order to recover fatigue and to think no more about bad situations that sometimes we are forced to live...

Here, however, something wonderful happens.

Elijah is not alone, God has listened to him like listening to a child in pain, as God listened to the cries of Israel enslaved in Egypt long ago.

God does not abandon His servant, His prophet, indeed God sends an angel and his food twice.

Here's how it affects our God, when it seems to us that everything is turning for the worse.

When it seems to be no hope, He draws near to us to comfort and take care of us. (Pause)

You know when your pastor Brian asked me to preach in your church here I was both grateful and a bit 'worried: what can I say to a community that is not mine and which I don't know the internal dynamics and mission?

So I was thinking of two biblical passages to be proposed for this time of Lent: one based on the book of Isaiah and the other was the story of Elijah.

Then last Saturday I went to the Presbytery of Chicago and the text of the meditation for the day was just that, so I thought maybe the issues facing the Presbytery can also speak to your heart and to your mind.

The meditation of reverend Laurie Ferguson had focused on something that really belongs to our everyday life: we are often confronted with difficulties, discouragement, misunderstandings and discussions, our red zone she said.

But when we find ourselves in this situation it is good to look at what can be our green zone, a real or symbolic place of peace, harmony, satisfaction and joy, a place where to find refreshment.

And so it is for Elijah who found relief from God. (pause)

It is not significant that what Elijah received as food is a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water? The water that reminds us of our baptism, the grace of God that comes, and the bread that reminds us how the communion in Christ Jesus reconciles us and strengthens us in faith!

But brothers and sisters, if we look closely at the story of Elijah will understand that we are in the presence of a God who is not only a comforter, but we are dealing with a God who has a specific challenge, a project for Elijah and for all He calls...

In fact, the second time the angel goes to Elijah and tells him not only to eat, but also explains the reason why he must do so. It's not about his past, his sufferings and misfortunes, it's not a word of comfort: "Eat and rest because of the persecution you have faced!"

No, the words of the angel are firm and focused on the future of Elijah: "Arise and eat, because the journey is too long for you!"

Elijah has to get stronger not to rest but to resume his journey, to begin his mission of steadfast witness of God and his will of grace and love for Israel.

So why does Elijah go to Mount Horeb and stay for a night in the cave?

Elijah is looking for his green zone.

He needs this time and place to pray God and to feel reassured, recharged and strengthened.

Even Jesus in the passage of Luke is in a quiet place to pray to God, to meet him and feel reassured, recharged and strengthened.

And is this not one of the reasons why we find ourselves here on Sunday, and in other moments of prayer and reflection?

The church can be our green pastures and the worship can really be our green zone.

But the story does not end there, in the cave!

Elijah must not stay in the cave.

God calls Elijah to meet him outside of it and send him back to his mission, as Jesus had prayed his Father and was strengthened to return to the crowd, and even to his enemies, to preach and heal people.

But if this is Elijah's mission, then what is our place in the plan of God?

The same one that was Elijah: to make us messengers of the freedom and justice that God wants for the world.

We have our own part to play in His will!

Sisters and brothers, it is not an easy task and starts right in the community and then continues in the world to which we are, once we have been refreshed and inspired like Elijah.

The Lord, after giving us a place (the church) and a time of rest (worship) to alleviate our sufferings and get up from falls, tells us that we cannot stop here.

The Lord leads us out of the church to confront us with life and with other human beings. (Pause)

In our journey we are certainly not alone: we are always accompanied by our God whose voice is like the breath that inspire us for our long journey of faith.

God is not in the spectacular events and chromatic sounds of the rushing wind or the earthquake, or dazzling as the

fire, but is a gentle whisper that inspire our everyday actions and words.

It is often a mission full of joy and enrichment, but sometimes also one of pain and suffering.

We can take it forward with confidence and without being discouraged because we are not left alone.

Like Elijah, we are always accompanied by God and by his kindness that raises us from the dust of life to give us the dignity of being co-workers, sons and daughters loved and comforted, ready for the mission, ready to say together:

Thy will be done!

Amen

The Final Blessing

May the road rise up to meet you

May the wind be always at your back

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

The rains fall soft upon your fields

and until we meet again,

May God hold you in the palm of His hand

Amen