

## Homily for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020



Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

Performance artists such as musicians and actors sometimes report that when they have had a great success the uplift and sense of satisfaction that come with it do not last long. Afterwards they can feel curiously let down, but it may not matter so much because they always have the next performance to prepare for. Their situation seems to me rather like that of Elijah, the first great Hebrew prophet, whose story goes back nearly 3,000 years.

This was the time when the kingdom of Solomon was divided in two – Israel in the north with its capital at Samaria and Judah in the south with its capital of Jerusalem. The ruler of the northern kingdom was Ahab, one of those who ‘did what was displeasing in the sight of the Lord.’ This is almost a technical term meaning that he abandoned the worship of the one true God for the false god Baal, being aided and abetted in this by his wife Jezebel. Elijah was the one called by God to speak his word to Ahab and bring him back to the right path. And he had a great success, winning a contest at Mount Carmel over the prophets of Baal, but it brought him little satisfaction. It only made the king and queen more hostile towards him and determined to do away with him. He fled for his life and came to the wilderness of Beersheba south of Judah. Sitting down under a broom tree (the burning bush of Moses) he says that he has had enough and longs only to die.

It is in this depth of despair that an angel of the Lord appears to Elijah, feeds him, restores him and bids him journey on to the holy mountain Horeb, also known as Sinai, where Moses received the Law. It is here that Elijah has his personal experience of God speaking to him, not in big dramatic ways like earthquake, fire or whirlwind, but in ‘the sound of a gentle breeze.’ This is how the version we hear in this Sunday’s Mass puts it. The older, more familiar translation calls it ‘a still small voice,’ but another version suggests ‘the sound of sheer silence.’ Quite a paradox, since silence makes no sound, but then so much about God is paradoxical and mysterious to us. At Pentecost he did appear as tongues of fire to the apostles, and we may ourselves wish for and even know this sort of startling appearance of God, but such events are probably rare. It is more in stillness and quiet that we are likely to be aware of God, and this, more than the occasional dramatic revelation, is what will help us to continue our own relationship with God and give ourselves to his service.

I am sure this is why Jesus, when he wanted to be in touch with God and restore himself with God’s presence in order to have the strength to continue his mission, went off by himself to be alone in a desert place or in the hills where he could pray, sometimes for long periods of time, all night or even forty days and nights. It is a regular pattern in the Gospels, as we hear today. Throughout the ages those who wish to know God and be close to him have constantly found that in order to do so they need to withdraw from their regular everyday life and be on their own in a remote place where they can be free of the normal distractions of daily life. John the Baptist, St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi – there are many examples. Retreats and our own times of prayer can serve the same purpose.

In the millennium year 2,000 I saw an advertisement for a retreat in the desert of New Mexico which somehow attracted me. I must have seen that stark barren landscape in Western films, and something about it appealed to me. In the event, however, I did not go to New Mexico, but

that year made a retreat at a house in Norfolk – which is not like a desert: quite the reverse, mostly lush, rich farmland. But the retreat I did was called a desert retreat: the idea of it was to have no or minimal content – no reading, no talks, no sacraments even, only a daily time of faith sharing when those present could say to the others what was going on in their retreat and how they thought God was dealing with them. It is a good format which I have found rewarding - just you on your own with God.

That should be a delightful prospect, but it can be a fearful one when we do not know what God may be saying or calling us to, or what we may discover about ourselves when all the usual occupations of daily life are taken away. A writer called William Dalrymple recorded coming to a monastery in the desert area of Egypt. He said to one of the monks, 'We believe God is everywhere, we can be with him anywhere at all, so why do you have to come to the desert to find him?' The monk replied, 'Yes, that is right, God is everywhere, but the desert is very good for getting to know yourself, and if you do not know yourself how can you know God?'

Maybe during the time of lockdown, when all our regular supports have been removed, we have come to know ourselves a little better, and in doing so come to know God more closely: for, as the story of Elijah tells us, he is always present to us in every circumstance and will especially be wanting to be close to us in moments of darkness and desolation. He is ever ready to feed and revive us and lead us further on to know more of himself. Again like Elijah we may have come to know our need for times of quiet and stillness when we can hear that still small voice. In fact, if we are going to hear it, it is necessary to lay aside our own thoughts and concerns and just be there with God, and if we can do that who knows what we may accomplish for him?

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday Peter sees Jesus walking on the water and thinks, 'I could do that.' And so long as he forgets himself and trusts in God he can, but as soon as he remembers what he is and where he is and what he is doing he sinks. I once heard a commentator say of Andy Murray, when he was doing particularly well in a match, 'Let's hope he doesn't start thinking!' If he could simply trust himself to his play and the game it went well. If he had started thinking he was on the verge of a great victory and going to win the championship, it would have got in the way.

More and more I believe it is by letting go (losing our life in order to find it, as Jesus says) that we come to know our true self and our true nature as people created and loved and indwelt by God. If we can know ourselves in that way, we can do anything, or rather God can do anything in us.

As the saying has it, LET GO – LET GOD.

Wishing you happy days of letting go, Fr. Robin

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