

Reflection for September 2020
Theme: Prophets- The Hidden Life Elijah

A Reflection on 1 Kings 17

English pastor and author F. B. Meyer recounts the following story of a little boy who had just finished reading the life of Elijah.

One wintry night John made a strange request of his widowed mother, as they sat in their fireless room, beside a bare table. "Can we leave our door open for God's ravens to come in Ma?" Somehow little John was certain they must be on their way. It so happened that the burgomaster(mayor) of that German town was passing by and was intrigued by the sight of the open door on a cold, wintry night. He entered their humble abode and enquired the cause.

When he learnt the reason, the burgomaster(mayor) had tears in his eyes. 'I will be God's raven.'" That night and henceforth, little John and his widowed mother were fed by God's raven.

As we begin our journey with the great prophets of the Old Testament, who better to lead us than the spiritual founder of our order, whose very life and works never cease to inspire us, and who continues to lead us during these uncertain times.

Call it our love for him or simple prejudice because he seems 'our own', we will dedicate two months to reflect upon two of the greatest and most defining aspects of Elijah's life: his hidden life and the other his zeal for God's kingdom, for it is these very two aspects that define our purpose at the Apostolic Carmel too. In fact our own foundress, Mother Veronica was one of the few leaders in the Church who lived both- the active as well as the contemplative part of the Religious life! So through the intercession of our dear Mother Veronica, let us discover our spiritual Father, in the hope that we may imbibe both- his love for silence and his courage in ministry. This month we will look at Elijah's hidden life in detail.

"Get away from here... and hide" (v 3)

Soon after Elijah has pronounced a drought in Israel because of King Ahab's unfaithfulness to Yahweh, he is asked to leave from there and hide. One obvious reason for Elijah being asked to leave is for his own safety because King Ahab wanted to kill him just as his Queen Jezebel had massacred a number of prophets of the Lord. But his safety was not the only reason since God could have protected Elijah without him having to leave, just as he had protected a 100 prophets through his faithful servant Obadiah.

Certainly, there was a greater reason for Elijah to leave and hide. Perhaps what God wanted was to teach Elijah the value of the hidden life. Elijah had just catapulted to fame by daring to be an adversary of Ahab, but more so through his mighty prayers that could even stop the rain! Israel was witnessing one of the greatest prophets of all time, certainly God wanted him to spend some 'alone time', some 'quiet time' with him.

Let us therefore not be surprised then when God calls us away from the excitement of our lives and its hustle bustle, from our daily chores, and sometimes even from our apostolate! In fact coming to think of it, hasn't this pandemic been God's way of calling the world and all his children to a period of being 'hidden', of getting away from it all! *And if that be the case, then how sincere have we been to this quiet alone time that God is calling us into? Or have we found ways and means to relive the excitement and exhaustion of everyday life without having to leave our convents?*

Chasing our Cherith

Interestingly the name of the brook, 'Cherith' in Hebrew means to be 'cut away'. In life we may have to come to our own brook Cherith repeatedly. Sometimes our brook could come in the form of loss, sickness, bereavement, misunderstanding or perhaps just in the form of loneliness. *What have been some of the moments in our life which we in hind sight can see as God bringing us to brook Cherith? What do we think could have been his reason for taking us there? Were we patient during those times of waiting? Or did we restlessly tried to wriggle ourselves out of it?*

“And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there” (v 4)

Elijah is “cut away” to be brought to this brook but it is not a punishment as we may sometimes be tempted to think. It is in fact nourishment in a time of drought! Elijah is learning complete dependence on God to provide - to believe that the brook and the ravens will satisfy him. Along with obedience, he also learns humility when he must accept food from the beaks of ravens. Ravens can hardly carry a morsel. So, his servings come not by the plate but by a mouthful- a raven's mouthful!

Also, ravens were traditionally unclean creatures. Yahweh could have sent turtle doves or lovebirds to satisfy his chosen one. Why a ritually unclean and ugly bird like a raven! Because God can use anyone and anything to help us! It might not be from the traditional or acceptable sources that we usually expect. *Are we open for a possibility like this?* This episode also gives us hope in another way! Even if we consider *ourselves* to be spiritually unclean, God can use us, yes even us, to be ravens to a hungry prophet!

There is something there

Also notice the word 'there'. Ravens could have flown anywhere to feed Elijah but God wanted him at the brook and it was only *there* that God had commanded them to feed him. Not where he was preaching, not when he was with his people or even with the other prophets hiding in the cave (who were being fed by Obadiah), but he fed him 'there' at the brook.

Our time at the brook is meant to be a time of spiritual nourishment, even though we may be weaned off our usual 'spiritual support systems'. God wants us to find our solace not in what we “do”, as blessed and as needed as our apostolates may be, but solely in *Him*.

During this lockdown, what is that one aspect of your regular life/ apostolate that you derived meaning from, may be even a sense of purpose from - that God has taken away from you? Perhaps it was in your work with children? Perhaps it was in meeting people in their homes or in the parish, in the simple joys of being around the company you were fond of, or in the freedom to step out for a walk or a house visit as and when you liked. *How are you responding to this?*

“and it happened that after a while the brook dried up” (v 7)

Elijah must have watched the flow of the brook slow down until it completely dried up. This was the last source left for him in the drought, and this was where God had led him, but this too had dried up. Seems strange to say the least. Except that it was *not* the last source for Elijah and neither is it for us. Our first and last resort is always God. Sometimes we can get too comfortable even in our solitude, believing that *that* alone is life's purpose for us. And when that happens our source of spiritual nourishment must again be taken away, so that, like Elijah, we turn to God for help. While this lockdown was meant to be a time of being 'cut away' in our own brook Cherith, *have we become complacent even in this? Are we enjoying the solitude to the extent that we are not quite looking forward to getting back to our usual lives?*

“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there...” (v 9)

When the brooks run dry, God is not caught in a tight spot! The widow is not a stop gap arrangement and nor was the brook. They were all there as God intended. Interestingly, however, Elijah never knew that when he commanded the rain to stop, he would have to leave for a brook and be fed by ravens, nor did he know he was to then go to Zarephath- a Gentile city! When we follow God, we do not receive an itinerary of the destinations we will be covering along the journey. We allow ourselves to be surprised out of our comfort and to simply go where he leads! Sometimes his leading could be to communities or ministries or people we'd rather not go to, but go we must, and not begrudgingly as one forced against her will, but joyfully as one whose will has already become one with His.

“See, I have commanded a widow to provide for you” (v 9)

From being fed by unclean birds Elijah is taken to being fed by a Gentile woman- only, unlike the ravens the Gentile woman had not a clue that such a command had been made. This was not as automatic as the feeding of the ravens. Elijah would actually have to give voice to his need for the widow to be aware of it. Another lesson in humility!

When God spoke of a widow providing, it wasn't a rich widow who had inherited a lot of wealth after her husband's death. It was a woman so poor that she didn't even have enough for herself or her son and was asked to share out of her nothingness! It almost seems cruel of Elijah to ask the widow to first bake him a cake. There is a sense of propriety and a voice of self-sufficiency within each of us which almost wants to request Elijah, to not trouble the poor widow- she has enough troubles of her own. Besides she is a Gentile- why should she obey the word of Yahweh? For the simple fact that as much as God thinks about a nation, he also thinks of every single, individual, most especially a Gentile widow. Because God was not only providing for Elijah, he was providing for the widow too.

But for any of that to happen, the command which Yahweh had given, had to first reach the widow, and who else but a prophet to speak God's word! How often have we allowed that same voice of propriety and reason to not allow us to speak to people who do not yet know Christ? How often have we 'let people be' in their misery, in their loss, in the ignorance, because we didn't want to trouble or bother them with God's Word? Just as there was a command for this Gentile woman, there is a plan for every man, every woman, if we be but willing to speak God's Word to them. After all, Elijah had to make known his request, which put him in a vulnerable position but in expressing his need he becomes the reason why a family is saved from starvation and later a son is brought to life! Likewise, when we are vulnerable and feel foolish to express our need, we have to remember that through our humility, a miracle is on the horizon!

As we meditate on the hidden life of Elijah, may we allow ourselves to be led by God, to brooks and ravens, to be fed and satiated knowing it is silence and solitude that we will be nourished, strengthened and even humbled.

Questions for Reflection.

What are some of the brooks of Cherith that God has led us to?

What have we learnt in our moments of being 'hidden'?