

WISDOM'S HOLY FEAST

Pentecost 3 – Cycle C: 1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17

My father was quite shy about playing the stock market – and with good reason. His own step-father had lost all of his savings by making a bad investment in the early 1920's. And then there was the stock market crash of 1929 which came when my dad was in his second last year of university. I expect that he was traumatized by those two experiences; and I'm fairly sure that the closest he ever came to investing money was buying a Canada Savings Bond. He did have some fatherly advice for me, though. He said to me, "If you're ever going to invest in something, invest in a bread company. People always need bread: bread is the staff of life!"

We don't hear that phrase "the staff of life" much anymore because our diet has become amazingly varied. There is no one food that is common to the majority of our meals. Many people even avoid bread, for one reason or another, enjoying other foods in its place. It is probably safe to say, however, that for most of the human story and across most cultures, bread has been the staple of almost every diet. As such, it has enjoyed a high symbolic value. Bread is not just bread: it is synonymous with life itself.

This morning's First Reading takes place during a terrible drought not only in Israel, but also in Phoenecia, the location of the town of Zarephath. There has been no harvest of grain; people are living on what little food they have saved or scrounged; they face death from starvation when their supplies run out. The widow of Zarephath and her son, we learn, will surely die when they no longer have bread. When Elijah asks her for a morsel of bread, we find out that she is gathering sticks for the fire over which she will bake her last-ever cake or loaf of bread. With her handful of meal and a little oil in her jug, she tells Elijah that her plan is to go home, prepare it for herself and her son, so that they may eat it and die. To have bread is to live; not to have bread is to die.

But a miracle occurs through Elijah's visit. He tells her that the Lord God of Israel will not let her run out of food. He says, "[your] jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." There will always be enough for their daily bread. As we read on in the story, we learn that Elijah's promise was fulfilled. They ate for many days; the woman and her son did not die.

Later, though, there is another crisis. The boy becomes ill. The author of this account reports that "there [was] no breath left in him." We hear this as a symptom of his illness, but it is more likely another way of saying that the boy is dying. Like bread, breath is synonymous with life. The widow, the boy's mother, makes connections with her son's illness and Elijah's presence in her home. She interprets her son's illness as God's judgment on her, exclaiming, "You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" Elijah does not respond. Clearly, he is shaken, not only by the boy's illness, but by the mother's accusation. He carries the boy upstairs in their house, lays him on his bed, and then, in the relative privacy of the upper chamber cries out to the Lord, echoing the widow's accusation. "O Lord my God," he prays, "have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Elijah then stretches himself over the child three times and prays, "O Lord, let this child's life come into him again." In what is now a second miracle, the boy revives. Elijah brings him downstairs returning him to his mother with the declaration: "See, your son is alive."

It is at this point, that we begin to understand the significance of Elijah's visit. The miracles are understood by the woman as signs; and through these two signs, she has experienced the power and grace of the God of Israel who was, in all likelihood, not her God previously. Phoenecia was the centre of Baal worship in the region. Having experienced the power and grace of the God of Israel, having experienced the power and grace of God in Elijah, she confesses her faith: "Now I know," she exclaims, "that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." The word "truth" suggests that she has more than faith, however. She has also gained wisdom. Faith plus understanding equals wisdom; and it is wisdom that secures faith, that tempers faith; that takes faith to the next level, so to speak, and prepares proclamation. As those who have turned to God through faith in Christ Jesus, we pray such wisdom for ourselves; to prepare our own proclamation as his disciples. And we are called to give what we have received: the wisdom of God which, as we can see clearly in today's First Reading

and in today's Gospel is *life*. God gives us bread – for *life*; God gives us breath – for *life*. God give us Jesus – that we may have *life*, and have it abundantly – so abundantly that we can give it to others.

Our Gospel today is in parallel with the account from 1 Kings. Jesus encounters the widow of Nain at the town gates; her son has died, and out of compassion he restores the young man's life. The people in the story make the connection immediately with Elijah when they remark, "A great prophet has risen among us." The Gospel account is different from the Old Testament story, however, because of that essential component "compassion". Elijah could not see the big picture, as it were. When the widow of Zarephath lashed out against the God of Israel, Elijah essentially echoed her complaint. Jesus, full of the wisdom and knowledge of God, illuminates the Elijah account for us by making us aware that God's compassion lay beneath all the events that took place in Zarephath; all the events throughout Elijah's life that brought people to faith.

Compassion lies at the heart of God's grace. And through Jesus, we learn that when we allow compassion to lead us, *life* is given through our words, through our actions, and through our presence. Compassion begets life; and life is the very wisdom of God, received so that we might give it away for those who know only of death; those without sufficient bread; those who cannot breathe because they are so weighed down by burdens greater than they are.

We may have, through our personal suffering, identified with the widow of Zarephath or her son; the widow of Nain or her son. But Jesus, at least, would have us identify with *him* as those who have learned from him about the healing and transforming power of the gospel; as those who have learned compassion from him. The wisdom that underlies these two incidents – one in Zarephath and one in Nain – is the same wisdom that raises Jesus from the dead, that forgives our sin, that calls us into mission for others.

Wisdom's holy feast is about bread for all of God's children; breath for all of God's children; that we should have compassion for all people; that we might give life that all might live in hope and know of God's grace. Wisdom's holy feast is about our words, our actions, and our presence providing bread and breath and life.