

Bulletin Reflection 2021.08.08. Year B1. Week 18. Ordinary Time.

“No one lives on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Mt 4:4)

There was a severe drought in all of Israel. But of all those affected, the Lord chose to send His prophet Elijah to a widow and her son living in Zarephath, a Sidonian town. But was this encounter a blessing or a curse? If you were suffering a hardship and a messenger of God came to visit, what would you expect of him? If I am this widow I would want the prophet to instantly rescue me from the drought and the resulting famine. If I am suffering a lockdown during a pandemic, then probably some extra rolls of fresh toilet paper... wait... never mind.

Well, what a letdown, because even after the poor widow explained her dire circumstances, Elijah asked to share her last remaining bread with him. Worse still, he had the audacity to demand a portion for himself first before she and her son could eat. In 2021 pandemic-stricken Australia, this could be equivalent to a family who'd be down to their last toilet roll, only for some stranger to push in and use their bathroom first. Her response though was not hostile – perhaps the reason why the Lord sent Elijah to her. For even as the arrival of the prophet seemed to immediately worsen her predicament, she did not reject his ostensibly outrageous request, but obeyed, trusting in the word of God. And the reward for her faith was abundance of life where there was previously thought to be none.

God's Presence may seem at first a curse rather than a blessing. The widow's main problem was that she had not enough to eat, yet her situation exacerbated as soon as the Lord's representative came. However, after her response of patient perseverance and trust, not only was she provided with physical food but more importantly her spirit was nourished. Ultimately, the reward of faith was far more valuable than the never-ending supply of meal and oil, as even the greatest earthly blessing is due to expire at death. Short-term, she was in more trouble as soon as God came knocking on her door. But long-term, she was clearly better off than anyone else after His visitation through the prophet. So by the end, her initial struggle was revealed to be a blessing rather than a curse. Likewise our lesson is to see as God sees – long-term rather than short-term, in fact, so far ahead that our perception extends beyond temporal to become eternal. For only then can we recognise the good of Divine Providence, which sustains and perfects us even as we struggle with immediate worldly concerns.

Hence Jesus tells us: “I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it.” Not that Christ will instantly eradicate all of life's problems, but that we will be fine as long as we trust in God. So instead of focusing all our attention on life's pressing issues, like the widow of Zarephath we can offer to God first whatever little we have to give, trusting that He will look after us. For our Heavenly Father knows what we need even before we ourselves are aware. Jesus teaches therefore, “Set your hearts on His kingdom first, and on His righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well.”

So let us not be too quick to dismiss our current struggle as a curse. For when we accept suffering with faith, if we persevere and remain in the Lord, in the end faith may reveal it to be a blessing rather than a curse.