

Food for the Long Journey

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The people of the Middle East and Africa are known for their hospitality to strangers. The terrain and climate are very challenging and hostile for strangers. Therefore, inhabitants of the area have developed sensitivity and welcoming culture to strangers. The source of blessing to Abraham to be the father of many is related to the welcoming of strangers (Genesis 15). I come from a countryside, where many cattle and goat herding families move from place to place. A group of families were living by a main travel route. A gentleman well known to the community was passing by and asked if any of the families would offer him a cup of coffee. All the women said that they did not have coffee and the gentleman said, "If you cannot offer a cup of coffee, you should not settle by a main route, where people go back and forth." The women, who could not accommodate offering a cup of coffee or a cup of water were caught off guard and broke a cultural code, welcoming the stranger, especially if you pitched your tent by a main route. The gentleman was within his cultural right and expectations to reprimand the women.

In the first reading, Elijah was traveling through the desert, a hostile environment and he could not find any person to welcome him. He could find a partial shade under a broom-tree that can survive the arid desert environment with little moisture. No one around to offer him the traditional hospitality, Elijah's grievances aimed at God; he is wishing death to end his misery. People say that the desert heat can make hallucinate and most likely Elijah was in that state and fell asleep of exhaustion. In his hopeless situation, Elijah realizes God is ever present and caring for him, "An angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat. Elijah looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water." Even after he had his food and drink, Elijah was not motivated to continue the journey God had set him on. He needed another nudge to wake up and nourish himself for the long journey ahead.

Like Elijah, we are on a journey too. Unlike Elijah who had to travel through the desert, we have a clear route to follow for Jesus has told us, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). In the Gospel reading, the word life and live are repeated six times. The central theme is that Jesus is the "Bread of Life" and this bread is his flesh, the Body and Blood of Christ we celebrate and nourish from the Eucharistic table. It is this bread of life, given and broken for us that will be our food for the long journey of life in faith. Like Elijah, there are several obstacles

and discouragements that can derail us from “the way.” St. Paul names these obstacles as “bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling.” His advice is that these obstacles must be removed from us “along with all malice” for us to be compassionate and forgiving.

The biblical story of welcoming the stranger on a desert journey or the story of the Good Samaritan helping the nameless person, who fell in the hands of robbers is rooted in empathy and compassion. As Catholics, we have the bread and wine, Body and Blood of Christ as food and drink for our Christian journey. Christ’s compassion for us expressed through his own sacrificial offering to God on our behalf.