

Just prior to today's reading from the Old Testament, Elijah had challenged 450 priests of Baal to see which god, Baal or The God of Israel could light a fire to consume a holocaust sacrifice at the foot of Mount Carmel. When the false god Baal failed to light the fire, and Our God, the God of Israel lit a fire that consumed the sacrifice, the water and the rocks of the altar in spectacular fashion, Elijah had the people seize the 450 priests of Baal and he slit their throats.

When the King of Israel, Ahab and his Queen Jezebel heard of his actions they not happy. Jezebel sent word to Elijah saying that the same fate should fall on him essentially giving anyone in the kingdom the right to kill him and win the Queen's favor. Discouraged by their lack of faith, feeling abandoned because he had done what God had commanded but suffered persecution for it, in his pain Elijah went into the desert to lie down under a Broom Tree and die.

But God wasn't done with Elijah and sent an Angel to wake and feed him with bread from heaven, not once, but twice, showing him his love and support. Once his strength was restored, he continued on the journey God had given him to the Mount of Revelation, Mount Horeb.

Flash forward this reading from Eucharistic discourse in St. John's Gospel. The Jews argue among themselves because they see Jesus as truly human, and they are correct. Jesus responds that he is the Son of God. Truly human, truly God but he doesn't emphasize that point. He reminds them that God is teaching them, as spoken by the prophets. They don't understand, that they need to believe in him, and they reject him. They need to believe that he is the bread of life and they need to set aside their desire for power long enough to pay attention and hear what he is saying, to try to grasp the gift he is offering.

Jesus, placed in a feeding trough for animals at his birth declares that he is food for all who believe in him. Even his disciples had to wonder how he was going to accomplish this feat. Jesus had been talking for a while now about the necessity for him to return to Jerusalem for his Passion and death, but they had placed the discussion in the same bin that we place the news about a terminally ill relative or friend. They / we know the facts, but since Jesus / our friend appears to be healthy there isn't any need to pay attention to the grim reality right now.

Our Lord went willingly to his death on the Cross. In every aspect, by any measure his death was a sacrifice. In the Hebrew tradition there were many types of sacrificial offerings depending on the intent of the person or persons offering the sacrifice. In all but one type of sacrifice, the animal that was sacrificed became a meal for the priest, the people or both. The priest and the people consumed the animal in the type of sacrifice offered for sin. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, our Passover Sacrifice was sacrificed on the cross, therefore there has to be a way to partake in that sacrifice by the people God has chosen to be his own.

At the Last Supper, with the institution of Holy Orders and the Eucharist, Jesus made it possible for all who believe in him to participate in the sacrificial meal by receiving his body, blood, soul and divinity in the Sacrament of the Eucharist; Jesus, the bread of life.

If Jesus, the sacrifice, the bread of life is present here in this Tabernacle, soon to be present on this altar, why isn't his church packed to the rafters with believers? If we as Catholics really believe that the Eucharist is Jesus, and that he becomes one with us, how is it possible to turn our backs on him and fail to get to Church on Sunday? How can we sit down for the sacrificial meal without washing our hands, in other words regularly seeking the Sacrament of Reconciliation to ensure we are properly disposed for the celebration?

Hearing these words, you are probably shouting in your minds, 'Hey Deacon, I am sitting in the pew, do you need new glasses? Why are you saying this to me?' Fair point.

It is because it is everyone's responsibility to ensure that the pews are full. We are the ones, the people who participate in the Paschal Sacrifice who are responsible for bringing back the Catholics who have fallen away from the fold. We are the ones who are responsible for reaching out to our brothers and sisters in other Christian faiths to bring them into the fullness of their faith by becoming Catholic. We are the ones, who are responsible for reaching out to the un-churched, the lost and confused who are trying to seek spirituality, seek God in purple crystals, hugging tree trunks and the myriad of other foolishness that happens when people decide that they can try to control God.

And what about us? Aren't we all guilty of the same sin, turning away from the Church and the Eucharist at some time in our lives? Maybe for years? Maybe for just a weekend? But then again, because we are all wounded sinners, doesn't our journey back home give us a great starting point for the discussion to bring others back to the Church?

Just thinking about the task is enough to make us want to join Elijah under the Broom Tree in the desert. So many lost souls, so much resistance, we witness the miracle of the Eucharist at every Mass, we experience Our Lord's compassion in Reconciliation, but we are not sure what to say, how to guide the conversation. We do our very best to slay the modern version of the priests of Baal and yet it seems so little.

But we have more than a couple of loaves of bread, some oil and some water to help us. We have the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation. We have the Magisterium of the Church to keep us free from error, and most importantly we have Christ within us to strengthen us for the task ahead.