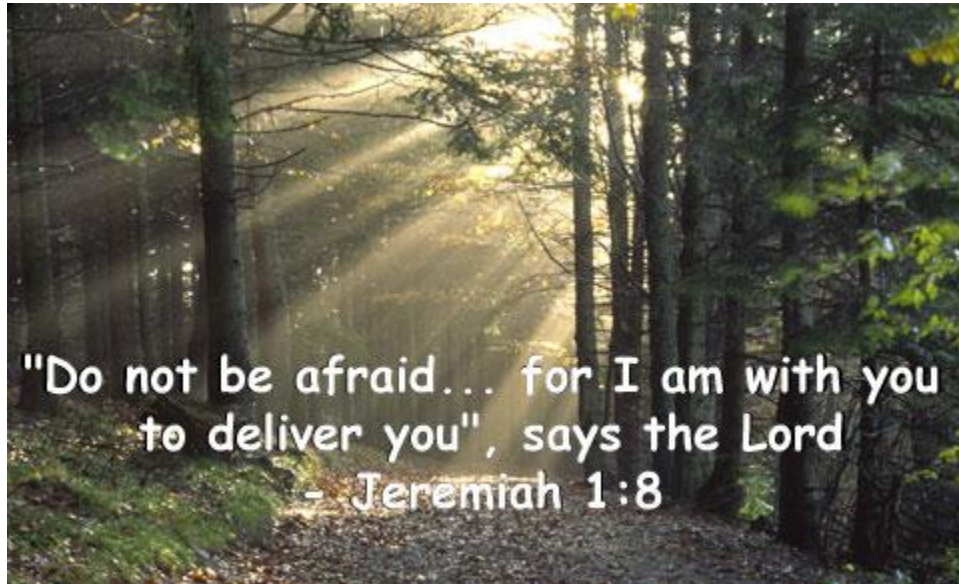


## DO NOT BE AFRAID

Readings: I Kings 19:4-8; John 2: 1-11



"Come to me all you who suffer" – we will hear this invitation of Jesus to his disciples many times over the next few days. It is the theme for pilgrimages to Lourdes this year. People suffer in many different ways. Pope Benedict on the day he solemnly began his ministry as Pope, saw himself as the shepherd who has to go out into all the different deserts of the world in which the sheep are lost and suffering:

There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's obscurity, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.

Here in Lourdes we think especially of the suffering of people who are sick. You, our invalids, are the centre of our pilgrimage. Sickness can often feel like a desert, bringing pain and weakness, cutting you off perhaps from activities you used to enjoy, or from things that you had hoped to achieve, making you anxious about the future, more dependent on other people than you had ever expected to be.

All of us, sick and healthy, have come here with our own deserts, our own needs and sorrows and fears. Each one of us, as the Pope put it, "is the sheep lost in the desert which no longer knows the way".

We recognise ourselves in Elijah. In our reading, he was in the desert, in the wilderness; everything seemed to have gone wrong for him and he wished he were dead: 'Lord', he said, 'I have had enough'. We all know that feeling, the feeling of exhaustion, the feeling of being overwhelmed by worries or sadness or anxiety. Elijah had run away because things had got too much for him; he could not bear it any more. The response that he received is also meant for us: "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too long for you".

God is telling us what his angel told Elijah. First of all he tells us to get up: 'Stand up, do not be afraid; do not feel overwhelmed; I am with you'; then he tells us to eat the food that has been prepared for us: 'I am offering you the Food that will give you all the strength you need'. We are here at Mass because we have heard that instruction. "The Food that Jesus gives is his flesh for the life of the world; whoever eats this food will never die". He gives the Body which was

scourged and which hung on the Cross, the Blood that was poured out from his wounds. He gives us himself. He gives us his love which proved stronger than a shameful, cruel, unjust death.

The Body we receive is also the Body which rose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father. So when we receive his Body, we share a life that is stronger than any suffering. We share his love which invites all those who suffer to come to him and to find rest.

We come here because at the Last Supper he told us: "Do this in memory of me". Whenever we obey Jesus we are following the only instruction that Mary is ever recorded as giving: "Do whatever he tells you". She spoke those words when she alone noticed the acute embarrassment of the young couple whose marriage celebration was about to turn into a disaster. She noticed and she turned to her Son, and persuaded him to respond, although his hour had not yet come. The response was far beyond anything that could have been imagined – not a few bottles of wine to tide them over the excruciating embarrassment, but somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons! We never really understand how generous God is!

Mary tells us to do whatever he tells us. And so we offer this Eucharist in memory of him. God's love is more powerful than any suffering; God's generosity knows no limits. At this grotto in this year of the Eucharist Mary invites us to hear her Son and to come to him with all our pain and sorrow and fear. As Pope Benedict told us on the day he began his ministry as Pope:

Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life. Amen.

22 June 2005