

Elijah was a magnificent prophet. The wonders Elijah worked, and the extraordinary manner of his ascension to heaven, have given him a unique place in Jewish sacred tradition, which states that he will reappear to announce the arrival of the Messiah. At the circumcision of a Jewish child it is the custom to place a chair for Elijah in the belief that he will safeguard the child. At the Passover meal, an extra cup of wine is poured for Elijah and an empty chair is reserved for him at table. During the meal the door is flung open to let him in.

We heard in the first reading that Elijah reaches Mount Horeb. Did you wonder how he ended up there in the first place? Well, here is the background to that story. The year is around 860 BC. The place is the northern kingdom of Israel. The kingdom is ruled by King Ahab, and Ahab is ruled by his wife and queen, Jezebel. Under her influence Ahab has built pagan temples and opened his palaces to the hundreds of false prophets and cronies Jezebel has employed as part of her travelling circus. Elijah appears in the scene. He is unemployed, homeless and a bachelor. We don’t know how, but Elijah becomes fully employed as the prophet of the God of Israel and is chosen to confront the infidelity of the monarchy, in short, Elijah is expected to do the impossible. When Jezebel is off on one of her trips, Elijah challenges her prophets to a public contest on the top of Mount Carmel.

The king and the assembly of people watch the trial of strength between Elijah and all the queen’s men. No voice heeds the prayers of the false prophets; but when Elijah speaks, a fire appears and burns up his offering. The crowd shouts: “The Lord is God... the Lord is God.” Elijah helps restore the people’s faith and fidelity in the one true God. Meanwhile, Elijah exploits his win and has all the false prophets dragged into the valley, where they are put to death. When Jezebel returns from her shopping trip to learn that her cronies have been wiped out, she sends Elijah a telegram to say that he will join them by the following day. Elijah runs for his life and escapes into the wilderness.

The prophet makes a forty-day trek across desert terrain until he reaches Mount Sinai, where Moses had first received the Law from God. Elijah wants to die; he is deeply depressed, alone, hunted, hiding in a cave, clinging to his faith in God. Then he has an extraordinary encounter with God – as we heard in the first reading.

The scene in the gospel today presents Jesus praying to his Father. His followers are separated from him. It is night. They are in a boat which is battling against a heavy sea and strong winds. All seems lost. Jesus calls to them and tells them not to be afraid, and then he comes to them over the water. When Peter tries to do the same as Jesus, *even he* is seen to begin to doubt Jesus’ power and to panic. But Jesus supports him, then asks him, “Man of little faith, why did you doubt?” My question is “why should Peter not doubt?” After all, people don’t walk on water and Peter as a fisherman knows this well. One should not even try something so unrealistic. We are like Peter. We ask the Lord to help us do the impossible like bringing peace, forgiveness and love in a broken world. Our lack of faith can cause us to decide ahead of time what is impossible and fail to do what is actually possible. By our title, Christian,

we accept the responsibility of doing what seems impossible to the world. Remember, Peter did not walk on water with his own power. It was Jesus responding to his faith that kept him up.

When Peter “felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink”. This tells us of our own struggle in our faith that falters as we panic when we look at the surrounding danger, Jesus – even though he is with the Father – will come and save us. This is Gospel. This is good news indeed.

Neither Elijah nor Peter had the faith to match their zeal, but God supported both of them in their dangerous tasks. That promise is extended to all who put their faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us go back to the same setting... We, the followers of Jesus, are physically separated from our churches, it is dark around us and we are battling against a heavy sea of disease and fear and all seems lost. We wonder why Jesus always seems to be off somewhere else. And even though we know that we won't be asked to walk on water, we get that sinking feeling all the same. In that plight we are not thrown back on our resources. The Lord is willing to support us in doing the impossible, to give us the courage to live through these difficult days that might seem impossible. What we need is enough faith to enable us to step out of the security of the boat we call everyday sensible life. Peter starts out by saying, Lord if it is you... If we believe that Jesus is the Lord who saves us, then we can confidently step out of our fear and confidently walk towards him. Don't worry, even when we have doubt, Jesus will stretch his hand out and save me. In this community gathered in faith, we have the word of God and the bread of life and the support of each other. That has to be enough to keep us afloat. Where do I place my faith; in the power of the storm or in the power of God's saving presence.