



# *Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 8 August 2021

### READINGS

1 Kings 19: 4-8; Psalm 34: 1-8; Ephesians 4: 25 – 5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

## *The Bread of Life on Women's Day*

August is the month of compassion for the church and Women's Month in our country. This week we also commemorate Women's Day. What do women need most on Women's Day this year? On this day we honour the courageous actions of the 20 000 women who marched in 1956. We particularly name our respect for the leadership shown by Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Albertina Sisulu, Rahima Moosa and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn and recognise the heritage that lives on because of them. The day is also an opportunity to promote gender equality in all spheres and to speak out against gender-based violence.

Seen in this context, along with the slogan of the march: "You strike the women, you strike the rock," it is a day to celebrate fortitude and resilience. It doesn't seem quite right that the answer to my question: "What do women need most on Women's Day this year?" lies in gifts of chocolates or flowers. (Although if you have already bought them, they will definitely be appreciated).

In the lectionary passage from the first book of Kings, we read a short episode from the life of Elijah the prophet. We can't ignore the fact that he was male, but can I invite you to look beyond gender and see the similarities he shares with the women and men of this country whose position is first and foremost prophetic? The ones who stand for justice in a land of injustice.

Earlier in 1 Kings 16:30 it is recorded that King Ahab "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him". His wife, Queen Jezebel introduced the worship of Baal in the land, persecuting God's people and putting to death all the prophets she could find. In the face of cruelty, evil and ungodliness, Elijah was impressive. King Ahab called him "the biggest troublemaker in Israel." Sometimes what is intended as an insult is truly a compliment. How many of our brave and prophetic women to this day are labelled "troublemakers" for daring to challenge oppressive systems?

At this stage of Elijah's story, he has just reached superhero status, overthrowing the prophets of Baal in an impressive and dramatic show. But that does not sound like the man we have just read about:

Hearing that Jezebel wanted to kill him, he was overcome. He went a day's journey into the wilderness, came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

Even trouble makers and superheroes get tired. So too do you and I.

All at once an angel touched Elijah and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

What do women need most this year? Perhaps it is not flowers, but rest. Maybe it is not chocolate, but bread. At the very time when it is all too much, when we want to run away and give up, we are reminded of Jesus' simple prayer to meet our most basic need – "give us today our daily bread". And this is not just a snack. It restores Elijah so that he can continue his journey towards Mount Horeb, where he is hoping to find the answers he needs.

What do women need most on Women's Day? Not sentimental words but replenishment and courage for the road ahead. The mysterious provision of waking up to an angel's wisdom and freshly baked bread brings together two ideas that are also found in today's passage from John's gospel: the miraculous, transcendent God, present to us in something as ordinary and every-day and accessible as bread.

In the words, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty," Jesus shifts the crowd beyond thinking about physical food, to thinking about spiritual hunger as well. Using the image of living bread, Jesus invites us to see Him anew, to allow God to draw us in to a deeper faith, and to find the sacred in the ordinary.

In the words "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever," Jesus addresses our deepest need for redemption, and transformation. He answers our cry for salvation both now and in the life to come.

What do we need most this Women's Day? We need to pause on our journey, if only for a moment. We need to recognise and name what we are hungry for. Rest, sustenance, replenishment, courage and faith. Come to us in the form of Living Bread. I began today's message with a reference to prophetic leaders and holy trouble-makers. In this Women's Month and in line with the idea of the sacred being present in all that we might consider ordinary, let me add this final thought. There are women we see and listen to; women who lead with purpose. And there are unknown women who will probably not be quoted in public gatherings.

You may not see the prophetic nature of what you do each day, but you know the courage it takes. Our role is to be prophetic, wherever we are – to proclaim the truth of God's kingdom breaking through in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Some days we run and hide under a bush in the desert like Elijah, but tomorrow God wakes us and feeds us and restores us. So that into chaos, we speak hope. Into violence, we speak peace; into the storm, calm; where there is hunger, bread; where there is division and exclusion, we proclaim unity and belonging, where we are imprisoned by our past, we step forth in freedom and faith.

These are what we all need this Women's Day.