

Elijah and the Widow

Sisters and brothers,

How many loaves of bread have you?

This is the question Jesus asks his disciples in the story of the feeding of the 5000 at the lake of Galilee. I am sure you remember this.

The miracle of the bread puts Jesus in a line with the prophet Elijah. Both of them make sure that there is enough to eat for those who are with them.

The crowd around Jesus as well as the widow at Zarephath and her son suffer from hunger... In the OT story it is life-threatening hunger.

But through the trust of the widow in the word of God and in Elijah's demand, she never runs out of flour and oil again. And the hungry crowd around Jesus is satisfied by what the disciples share because they do simply as Jesus has told them. What we have here are not so much miracles of multiplying food or sharing, but miracles of trusting.

Often the widow of Zarephath is only seen in the shadow of the great prophet Elijah. But who would Elijah be without her? Without her food he would not have survived...

Here today the widow, the woman is in the centre.

Today we are having a communion service. Many of us will share bread and grapes. So why do I choose the story of a single and lonely woman when I preach to a big group of people?

Why choose the widow who meets Elijah as a main story in the service today?

...because groups are made of individuals. And the atmosphere in a group or a community has much to do with the personality of the individuals, with their attitude to life, and with their faith.

The widow of Zarephath is as much a prophet as Elijah is. She is a woman of the living God in a world dominated by foreign gods and their followers. And the widow is a part of the poor population who often have not enough for daily life.

Hunger, poverty and the miracle that comes through trusting and sharing are the themes of this woman and her story. And then and now it is essential to trust in God and share the little we have.

How much bread have you?

What is there that you can share? Give to others? Contribute to the community?

Jesus' question inspired me to take a closer look at the widow of Zarephath. Her story is short but full of challenging theology.

Elijah's call to the widow for food is a call to all of us...

"Bring me a bit of bread; give me of what you have..."

Elijah arrived at the gate of the town Zarephath. There he met this widow collecting firewood. She was doing what many women do at all times as a part of their daily chores: collecting wood so that meals can be cooked and hungry mouths fed.

Without introducing himself, Elijah spoke to that woman at the gate of town. He asked for something to drink.

We know that the widow is called by God to care for Elijah, but does she know? It is not mentioned in the conversation between the two.

When the widow walked away to fetch some water for Elijah, he shouted after her and asked for a bite of bread, too.

And now the widow becomes the centre of the story. For the first time she speaks, responds to Elijah's request "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Eat, and then die... We are here among the poorest of the poor. And death is already knocking at the door.

The widow shares her story with Elijah. She doesn't complain or whine, but clearly states the hopelessness of her situation: there is no future for her and her child because there is no food...

The widow has literally nothing to share but the little with which she was planning to prepare their last meal before they die.

At this point Elijah speaks to her; ...speaks as in many other stories angels do.

"Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son." And he promises, "For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."

The woman trusts him,” she went and did as Elijah said...”, we read in the Old Testament, and the promise comes true: so she as well as Elijah and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail.

Trusting in God, doing as Elijah had said, leads the widow from death to life!

In the face of death God provides food, flour and oil in abundance. The fullness which only God can provide will feed many. The blessing which the widow receives through her brave and unselfish sharing spills over onto others: many can now eat and live. The feast of life lies before them...

The widow’s caring becomes fundamental for the community in which she lives. One woman’s trust in God changes the whole situation: the living conditions of the poorest of the poor change because all of them now feel free to share the little they have.

The poorest of the poor learn how to share: water, bread and table. They share their stories, their lives, their future... and by doing so experience fullness.

Loneliness turns into relationship.

Isolation into community.

Lack of food into plenty to eat.

When we share, there is always enough for everyone, is the lesson today’s story is teaching us.

Once you put your trust in God, follow his call, and give from the little you have, your life will turn into a feast.

Let us begin with it today at the communion table in this church. Amen.