

One of the things you have all learned about Jesus was that he did not have a very long life, as we think of life. While he was still young, he was arrested and tried and condemned and executed. This makes us very sad, when we think how good and generous he was, and how he was carrying to us the word of God, and the powerful love which could heal and raise to life. We should have made him welcome and loved him and helped him; instead we turned against him and gave him this terrible punishment.

When Jesus was near the end of his life, he knew what was going to happen. He knew that his little band of friends and supporters would be completely devastated by his dying in such a way. They would wonder whether God, whom he had always called *Father* in the most intimate way, was really as close to him as he believed. What could Jesus do to prepare them for this challenge to their faith: how could he bring them to look beyond death to a world where the will of God is really honoured, and people are free to love and honour each other where they should?

He commands us to set love at the heart of our agenda: whatever we are to do, let it be with love and self-giving set before us. We must also listen to what he says:

*I give you a new commandment:  
that you love one another as I have loved you.*

The great sacrament we celebrate for you and with you today is doing exactly that.

In the first reading this morning we heard about a very tired prophet. Elijah was not a young person like you, but a man who had spent a long time calling people to God, calling people to be just and loving; and just like Jesus he had received nothing from others except punishment, fear, and hatred. So he feels his life is useless, and exhausted, and he even asks God to bring his life to an end. Then he falls asleep.

But the story isn't over. God sends him an angel to waken him, and he finds that there is food for him, to strengthen him. When we give someone food, it is so as to make them strong, to make them live. At first Elijah doesn't understand. He eats the food, and then wants to go back to sleep. But the angel wakens him again. *Eat some more*, he says, *or the journey will be too long for you!*

This is what I want to say to you today. You've been looking forward to this day for a long time now. You've learned a lot about the meaning of this holy food: how it is Jesus' gift to all who love him, how it makes us a family at one table all over the earth, how Jesus comes to us when we share in it. But I want to waken you again, and say: *Eat some more!* You have a very long journey to take, and this bread is the bread of travellers, bread that gets you on your feet, like the Israelites Moses awakened on the night of the Passover.

They ate their unleavened bread standing up, with their coats on, with their staffs in their hands, ready to leave the Egypt of slavery, and set out to the land of promise. This First Communion Day is only the beginning. We have a long way to go! So wake up - eat some more - and keep the image in your mind of the journey to God's joy, which lies at the end of all our travelling. Realise that you have in your Church a tremendous family, all coming with you on your way; as a Catholic you have friends in every place on earth, people to share with who are rich and poor, and simple and wise, a billion souls who share the one bread and the one cup - with Jesus, *and with you*. Never lose that belonging. Never neglect this vital food, which keeps us one with the Lord and with each other. Then you will know that you are listening to his words:

*I give you a new Commandment: to love each other as I have loved you.*