Homily for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B 9 August 2015

When she first sang “What’s it all about, Alfie?” the words probably held little meaning for the up and coming young pop star, Cilla Black, as she recorded the track back in the 60’s. But in recent years and months she pondered similar questions quite publicly. She was not at all happy with her declining eye-sight and hearing and she feared the kind of stroke that befell her just days ago in her Spanish home. She asked questions and entertained fears. Who could blame her?

She was not alone, because the question “What’s it all about?” surfaces again and again in most lives as we face challenges, disappointments and fears of our own.

In our first reading we see that Elijah’s own initial response to disappointment and physical tiredness was to seek a premature death, lying down in the heat of the desert. Note please, that he did this not once but twice.

The first time he awoke and did what the angel of God directed him to do, as if it were merely a short term task to be performed. He ate the food provided with little thought to where it came from or what it meant. But on the second occasion he responded in a much deeper fashion, and recovered not only his physical strength through the nourishment laid out for him, he responded to a challenge to keep moving towards a destiny more useful to him than death; an encounter with the love of God. The food offered to us by God calls forth not only a task but a meaning, purpose, and goal in life.

Jesus offers us the same purpose and goal in the Gospel; even in the face of ridicule and rejection he delivers his message of hope grounded in an eternal relationship with God. A relationship nourished by the life enriching bread that is his Body; which is an infinitely greater gift than the life preserving manna in the desert.

These readings can perhaps help us navigate our own path towards an ultimate meeting with God. It is always likely to be a path full of twists, turns, stumblings and setbacks; however long or short the journey is. And we may not always cope terribly well. This is normal; it is how we are, it is part of being human. As Victor Frankl observes “The meaning of life differs from person to person, from day to day and from hour to hour. [And he continues] What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment.”

Frankl also understood that there are times when the scale of the challenge is so profound when, for example, we are faced with a situation we cannot change; such as a permanent loss of someone or something or the immanent prospect of death. At such times he says; “When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves.”

These are the real moments of conversion, moments when our faith is tested to its limits, moments when we cry out in agony, distress and doubt, and the only reply is silence. Such moments require a new act of faith, a new willingness to press on, a new surrender to God’s love.

Don’t just take it from me, listen to what the great scientist Albert Einstein said: “To be religious is to have found an answer to the question, What is the meaning of life?” The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein echoes this insight when he says “To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning.”

Conscious then, of those who may be asking such questions and facing such challenges now we pray:

Remember O Lord,

Those who are sick,

Those who suffer pain or

Loneliness or grief,

Those drawing near to death,

And those we now name in our hearts…

Comfort them with your loving presence,

Sustain them with your promises,

Grant them serenity, trust and hope.

May they discover fullness in their emptiness,

Light in the midst of darkness

And meaning within the absurdity of suffering

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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