



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 15 June 2011

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The prophets, with their teaching and their preaching, had great importance in the religious history of ancient Israel. Among them the figure of Elijah stands out, impelled by God to bring the people to conversion. His name means “the Lord is my God”, and his life develops in accordance with this name, entirely dedicated to kindling in the people gratitude to the Lord as the one God.

The Book of Sirach [Ecclesiastes] says of Elijah: “then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, and his word burned like a torch” (Sir 48:1). With this flame Israel found its way back to God. In his ministry Elijah prayed; he called upon the Lord to restore to life the son of a widow who had given him hospitality (cf. 1 Kings 17:17-24), he cried out to God in his weariness and anguish while fleeing to the desert, for Queen Jezabel sought to kill him (cf. 1 Kings 19:1-4), however it was on Mount Carmel in particular that he showed his full power as an intercessor when, before all Israel, he prayed the Lord to show himself and to convert the people’s hearts. This is the episode recounted in chapter 18 of the First Book of Kings, on which we are reflecting today.

It was in the kingdom of the north, in the ninth century before Christ at the time of King Ahab, at a moment when Israel had created for itself a situation of blatant syncretism. Beside the Lord, the people worshipped Baal, the reassuring idol from which it was believed that the gift of rain came, and to which, was therefore attributed the power of making fields fertile and giving life to people and animals.

In spite of claiming to follow the Lord, an invisible and mysterious God, the people were also seeking security in a comprehensible and predictable god from whom they believed they could obtain fruitfulness and prosperity in exchange for sacrifices. Israel was capitulating to the seduction of idolatry, the continuous temptation of believers, deluding itself that it could “serve two masters” (cf. Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13) and facilitate the impracticable routes of faith in the Almighty even by putting its faith in a powerless god, fashioned by men.

It was exactly in order to unmask the deceptive foolishness of this attitude that Elijah gathered the People of Israel on Mount Carmel and confronted it with the need to make a decision: “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21) And the prophet, a herald of God’s love, did not abandon his people as they faced this decision; rather, he helped it by pointing out a sign that would reveal the truth. Both he and the prophets of Baal were to prepare a sacrifice and pray and the true God would reveal himself, responding with fire that would burn the offering. Thus began the confrontation between the prophet Elijah and the followers of Baal, which was in fact between the Lord of Israel, the God of salvation and of life, and the mute idol with no substance which could do nothing, neither good nor evil (cf. Jer 10:5). And so the confrontation also began between two completely different approaches to God and to prayer.

The prophets of Baal, in fact, cried aloud, worked themselves up, danced and leaped about and falling into a state of ecstasy, even going so far as to cut themselves, “with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them” (1 Kings 18:28). They had recourse to themselves in order to call on their god, trusting to their own devices to provoke his answer. In this way the idol’s deceptive reality was revealed: it was thought up by human beings as something that could be used, that could be managed with their own efforts, to which they could gain access through their own strength and their own vital force. Worship of an idol, instead of opening the human heart to Otherness, to a liberating relationship that permits the person to emerge from the narrow space of his own selfishness to enter the dimensions of love and of reciprocal giving, shuts the person into the exclusive and desperate circle of self-seeking. And the deception is such that in worshipping an idol people find themselves forced to extreme actions, in the vain attempt to subject it to their own will. For this reason the prophets of Baal went so far as to hurt themselves, to wound their bodies, in a dramatically ironic action: in order to get an answer, a sign of life out of their god, they covered themselves with blood, symbolically covering themselves with death.

Elijah’s prayerful attitude was entirely different. He asked the people to draw close, thereby involving it in his action and his supplication. The purpose of the challenge he addressed to the prophets of Baal was to restore to God the people which had strayed, following idols; therefore he wanted Israel to be united with him, to become a participator in and a protagonist of his prayer and of everything that was happening. Then the prophet built an altar, using, as the text says, “twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying: ‘Israel shall be your name’” (v. 31). Those stones represented the whole of Israel and are the tangible memorial of the story of the choice, predilection and salvation of which the

people had been the object. The liturgical gesture of Elijah had crucial importance; the altar was a sacred place that indicated the Lord's presence, but those stones of which it was made represented the people which now, through the prophet's mediation was symbolically placed before God, it had become an "altar", a place of offering and sacrifice.

Yet it was necessary for the symbol to become reality, for Israel to recognize the true God and to rediscover its own identity as the Lord's People. Elijah therefore asked God to show himself, and those twelve stones that were to remind Israel of its truth also served to remind the Lord of his fidelity, for which the prophet appealed in prayer. The words of his invocation are full of meaning and faith: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (vv. 36-37). Elijah turned to the Lord, calling him the God of the Fathers, thus implicitly calling to mind the divine promises and the story of the choosing and Covenant that bound the Lord indissolubly to his people. The involvement of God in human history is such that his name was inseparably connected with that of the patriarchs and the prophet spoke that holy Name so that God might remember and show himself to be faithful, but also so that Israel might feel called by name and rediscover its faithfulness. In fact the divine title spoken by Elijah seems somewhat surprising. Instead of using the customary formula, "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", he used a less known title: "God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel". The replacement of the name "Jacob" by "Israel" calls to mind Jacob's struggle at the ford of the Jabbok, with the change of name to which the narrator explicitly refers (cf. Gen 32:31) and of which I spoke in one of the recent catecheses. The substitution acquires a pregnant meaning in Elijah's invocation. The prophet is praying for the people of the kingdom of the north which was called, precisely, Israel, as distinct from Judah, which indicated the kingdom of the south. And now, this people, which seemed to have forgotten its own origins and privileged relationship with the Lord, heard itself called by name while the name of God, God of the Patriarch and God of the People, was spoken: "O Lord, God... of Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel".

The people for which Elijah prayed was faced with its own truth, and the prophet asked that the truth of the Lord might also be shown and that he intervene to convert Israel, detaching it from the deception of idolatry and thereby bringing it to salvation. His request was that the people might finally realize and know in fullness, who truly is its God, and make a decisive choice to follow him alone, the true God. For only in this way is God recognized for what he is, Absolute and Transcendent, ruling out the possibility of setting him beside other gods, which would deny that he was absolute and relativize him. This is the faith that makes Israel the People of God; it is the faith proclaimed by the well known text of the *Shema' Israel*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love, the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt 6:4-5). The believer must respond to the Absolute of God with an absolute, total love that binds his whole life, his strength, his heart. And it was for the very heart of his people that the prophet, with his prayers, was imploring conversion: "that this people may know that you, O

Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (1 Kings 18:37). Elijah, with his intercession, asked of God what God himself wanted to do, to show himself in all his mercy, faithful to his reality as the Lord of life who forgives, converts and transforms.

And this is what happened: “then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The Lord he is God; the Lord, he is God’” (vv. 38-39). Fire, the element both necessary and terrible, associated with the divine manifestations of the burning bush and of Sinai, then served to mark the love of God that responds to prayer and was revealed to his people. Baal, the mute and powerless God, had not responded to the invocations of his prophets; the Lord on other other hand, responded, and unequivocally, not only by burning the sacrifice but even by drying up all the water that had been poured round the altar. Israel could no longer have doubts; divine mercy came to meet its weakness, its doubts, its lack of faith. Now Baal, a vain idol, was vanquished, and the people which had seemed to be lost, rediscovered the path of truth and rediscovered itself.

Dear brothers and sisters, what does this history of the past tell us? What is the present of this history? First of all the priority of the first Commandment is called into question: worship God alone. Whenever God disappears, man falls into the slavery of idolatry, as the totalitarian regimes demonstrated in our time, and as the various forms of nihilism that make man dependent on idols, on idolatry, also demonstrate; they enslave him. Secondly, the primary aim of prayer is conversion, the flame of God that transforms our heart and enables us to see God and so to live in accordance with God and live for others. And the third point. The Fathers tell us that this history of a prophet is prophetic too if, they say, it foreshadows the future, the future Christ; it is a step on the journey towards Christ. And they tell us that here we see God’s true fire: the love that guided the Lord even to the cross, to the total gift of himself. True worship of God, therefore, is giving oneself to God and to men and women, true worship is love. And true worship of God does not destroy but renews, transforms. Of course, the fire of God, the fire of love burns, transforms, purifies, but in this very way does not destroy but rather creates the truth of our being, recreates our heart. And thus, truly alive through the grace of the fire of the Holy Spirit, of love of God, we are worshippers in spirit and in truth. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I welcome the members of the Catholic-Pentecostal International Dialogue and I offer prayerful good wishes for the next phase of their work. I also welcome the 50th Conference of the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration, now meeting in Rome. I thank the choirs, and particularly the University Choir from Indonesia, for their praise of God in song. Finally, I greet the delegates to the General Chapter of the Congregation of the Resurrection. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from the Philippines, Canada and the

United States, I invoke the Lord's blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds* present. Dear *young people*, for many of your peers summer vacation has begun while for others it is exam time. May the Lord help you to live this time with serenity and to experience the enthusiasm of faith. I invite you, dear *sick people*, to find comfort in the Lord who illumines your suffering with his salvific love. To you, dear *newlyweds*, I warmly wish that you may learn how to pray together so that your love be evermore true and enduring.

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