Text: 1 Kings 19:1-9

(1) Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.
(2) Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."
(3) Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.
(4) But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down by a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough: now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."
(5) The he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him: "Get up and eat."
(6) He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water, And he ate and drank, and lay down again.
(7) The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."
(8) He got up, and ate and drank: then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.
(9) At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Sisters and brothers,

39 years ago the text of the Agreement of Reformation Churches in Europe was finalised at Leuenberg near Basel, from 12-16 March 1973. The church fellowship that was enabled at that time - and has since grown - signified a common understanding of the gospel. The doctrinal condemnations referred to in the confessions no longer reflect the present-day doctrine of the assenting churches, and they now practise pulpit and table fellowship, including the mutual recognition of ordination.

Since my time as a pastor-in-training in a Reformed congregation in the United Church in the Rhineland, I have understood the "unity in reconciled diversity" gained in Leuenberg as being an expression of a new ecumenical life together of churches stemming from the Reformation; that is not just in keeping with the times but, above all, in keeping with the gospel. It is also a compass for me in my ministry as bishop.
And I confess that I have never been able to understand how Protestant churches could deny each other the Status of 'church' and not let each other share in the special features of their respective confession, and thus denomination. If understood properly, a confession is not a synonym for isolation and distrust of one another. Rather, with its "confession", the respective church make clear what it believes.

It is good that this understanding has become widespread precisely within German ecumenism. When talking of "unity in diversity" we do not gloss over the harm done by church division, but these terms express the fact that we look for what binds us together and find it, again and again. The identity of the respective 'others' deserves the highest respect, indeed, that is what enables discussion and dialogue.

The fundamental confession binding us Christians is: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" 1 Corinthians 3:11 defines the church: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid: that foundation is Jesus Christ." My own confession is founded in God's confession to me. With my confession I respond to the offer of God's love. Naturally my confession is always determined by the historical situation in which it happens. Luther claimed: "Tota nostra operatio confessio est", i.e. all our actions are confession.

The phrase "Jesus Christ is Lord" needs to be adapted to the changing times in our lives: the influence of money, violence, war, the relationship between men and women, unjust distribution of the earth's goods etc. - all this calls for timely confession. The statement made by this Assembly on the Situation of Christians in the Middle East is also an expression of this confession, in my view.

However, such a confession can only be credible if we offer it together. This also applies to our fellowship with Catholic brothers and sisters. We are beginning to perceive the points that bind us together more than that which divides us.

Let me mention a few such aspects: baptism, the Bible as a common source of knowledge, faith in the same Spirit of God that accompanies God's people, the common question about what we can do on earth, the shared image of the people of God as a pilgrim people, our faith in Jesus Christ. That which binds us grows when it becomes more important than that which divides.

Hence I would like to encourage our churches to allow one another to share in the wealth and beauty of each other's expressions of faith; and, above all, at this point in time, to bear public, resolute witness to our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.
A lot of things are going well: theological agreement is being turned into practical situations with their liturgical, spiritual, practical and organisational consequences.

But rather frequently the joy in such success is overlaid by experiences that recall the phrase of Elijah: "It is enough: now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." (1 Kings19:4).

Traugott Schall calls this despondency "Elijah fatigue". It is partly to do with the changed view and reality of the church and congregational life in our society. It is linked to the loss of plausibility of faith and religion that is reflected in the continuing departures from the church. It is connected with disappointment because strong personal and professional commitment and high expectations are less appreciated in view of what is seen as limited competence and apparently visible failures. This Elijah fatigue is linked to overload and, not least, to the constant question about our own piety, our own spirituality, and the future of our churches. Simply put, how can I find space and time in my daily routine to discover the message of the reconciliation of the world with God and to live from it? How can the Lord Jesus Christ find room in my life and in my church?

Elijah first did the right thing. He went to sleep. By the way, Thomas Aquinas praised sleep as a remedy for melancholy. Sleep, rest, silence cannot do us any harm either, and when Elijah wakes up, he finds bread and water at his head.

It is as though the angel wants to say: Have a good sleep, first of all. Then eat something! And so he eats and drinks and falls asleep again. A second time he wakes up, and then comes the order: "Get up and eat! Otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

Angels are necessary. For me they are a symbol that we human beings will not remain alone on earth, on the way through our life and church history. We will be visited and accompanied, supported and sustained, in real life. They help us to adjust to the changing situation. They preserve us from the temptation to close our eyes to the new things to come. They have a sense of how new things frequently overtax and scare us in our lives. The "fear not" with which they often begin their message is proof of this sense. Angels are God's messengers. In them, God turns to people; through them God cares for each of us. Do we not experience this still today? Yes, there are angels, many of them in very human form and also here in our midst there are those who have been angels to others. And quite often I have the impression that we in our church fellowship also become angels to each other, nurturing, encouraging and inspiring others with hope in God's name. Bonhoeffer expressed what I mean in his famous poem:
"By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered, and confidently waiting, come what may.

We know that God is with us night and morning, and never fails to greet us each new day."

We are wonderfully sheltered by "gracious powers". In those powers we meet the power of God in the world. Knowing we have shelter in God stops us from being thoughtless or even indifferent to what is happening in our world, in Europe. Terror and hunger, unemployment - all these things raise questions to us about how we can contribute to making the world more humane.

Elijah sets off. Instinctively, unconsciously he is drawn to the place where it all began. To the place where God revealed the divine Self: "I am the Lord your God." He took a long time to reach God and again creeps into a cave. And again he is called: "What are you doing in there, Elijah? You don't want to opt out, do you? Get up!"

We know the end of the story: Elijah meets God, in the still, small voice - the sound of sheer silence. And he is sent out into the world again.

That is also the message of our text. There will always be times in our lives when we are "dead tired" but also the message will ring out: "Get up. You have a long way to go." Don't let your head hang low, or condemn yourself to passivity. Instead: "Get up!"

That is our calling as the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe.

The message is not: "we are surrounded by death in the midst of life", but "we are surrounded by life in the midst of death".

Thanks be to God!

Amen