

Trinity 17

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Numbers 11: 4-6m 10-16, 24-29

James 5: 13 – end

Mark 9: 38-end

How often do we suddenly catch ourselves moaning?! Perhaps about our day-to-day lives, or about other people who impinge on them unexpectedly? I must confess that I am often aware that I – and other people I speak to – quite often lapse into a general, mild state of dissatisfaction about something going on at the moment, be it the state of the country, or of society, or of a different generation – or just everyday activities.

One of the ways in which we comforted ourselves during the long, dark days of the lockdowns last year, was by saying that it had made us so much more aware of the things we valued – our families and friends, walks in the park, going to the shops, going to church... And yet, how quickly we have forgotten what it felt like, to be isolated in our own homes, forbidden from even the most banal activities, only allowed to exercise for short and limited periods.

It is good for us to remember, from time to time, how it felt, and not to slip into taking for granted once again the things we found we most valued. Yet this is not a new phenomenon.

Our Old Testament reading shows the Israelites doing exactly the same thing – forgetting the nightmare from which God has rescued them and complaining instead about the lack of comfort in their new situation. Of course, we know that in Egypt, they were slaves, beaten by Egyptian taskmasters as they worked to build fine edifices for them in the blazing sun. Pharaoh had commanded that their babies should not be allowed to live, so they didn't overrun the country (we all remember the story of Moses, hidden in the bullrushes to protect him from this fate). God heard their misery, and rescued them through great miracles, parting the Red Sea, so that they could escape into the wilderness, drowning their Egyptian pursuers in the sea behind them.

Now, in today's story, we hear the Israelites looking back almost with nostalgia to their lives in Egypt. Bored now with the manna, which they greeted as a miracle when it first fell from Heaven and saved them from hunger, they look back with rose-tinted spectacles on their time in Egypt when they (apparently) enjoyed unlimited melons, garlic, leeks and cucumber. No mention, here, of brutal treatment or servitude.

Unsurprisingly, both God and Moses are deeply frustrated and angered by this, aware of how much had been done to release the Israelites from their suffering. This is not to say that when we are in real anguish, we cannot come before God in pain, grief or fear.

When the Israelites cried out to him in the midst of their suffering as slaves in Egypt, God acted to rescue them. But perhaps this story is read today to remind us of the need for thanksgiving, for our own good fortune and deliverance and for the lessons we may have learnt through recent difficulties.

It underlines the truth that our human nature drives us, time and again, to complain about our situation – perhaps we can hear our own grumbling or moaning in the voices of those Israelites, recorded thousands of years ago, yet so recognizable in media commentary or social media exchanges today. But human grumbling does not stop at the day-to-day details of our lives.

Both the continuation of our Old Testament reading, and our Gospel reading record further situations in which people react with suspicion and criticism to others, who seem to be somewhat different from them... Moses had told the people to go out to the tent of meeting, and there some of them were moved to prophesy in the Spirit of the Lord. But two of them stayed behind in the camp, and the Spirit came upon them there and filled them with inspiration.

The response of their fellow-Israelites was to say, "They may be speaking in the name of the Lord, but they are doing it in the wrong place! Stop them!" In the reading from Mark's Gospel, the disciples likewise were highly suspicious of others who were managing to heal people in Jesus' name, even though they were not part of the "in-crowd" of Jesus' close followers. Jesus' rebuke is robust: "Whoever is not against us, is for us."

He echoes Moses' response to Joshua, that he should not be jealous, but pray that all God's people could prophesy in the Spirit, wherever they might be.

How often do we feel that people may be doing good things, things we would naturally approve of, but seem to be doing it in the "wrong" way or in the "wrong" place? And of course, the hard-hitting counterpart to this question is, "How often do we accept people doing things we **don't** believe are morally right, because they are saying them in ways or places we traditionally respect?"

As human beings, perhaps we are all too quick to impose our own narrow-minded rules of what seems to us to be appropriate, before we look at the deeper questions of what is true to Christ's teaching.

Frederick Faber, the writer of our final hymn this morning (no 461 NOT 561 as stated in the pew sheet), "There's a wideness in God's mercy" had himself struggled with the variety of Christian expression between different denominations and the hostility and censure which these provoked. His hymn reminds us that God himself is more loving and less judgmental than we can ever be.

Our interpretations of "what God wants", translated into doctrine or tradition or correct behaviour can result in harsh criticism or suspicion of others.

Jesus' declaration, "Whoever is not against us is for us", could perhaps be expanded into verse 4: "But we make his love too narrow, by false limits of our own, and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own."

God is not critical, although the Old Testament suggests that he can be frustrated by perpetual complaining. He delights in every person who acts in his name, and so we too, should honour and value those people and things he has sent us to reveal his goodness to us.

Amen