

A sermon preached by Trevor on Sunday 31st March 2019

Text: Exodus 16.2-4, 9-15

We are currently in the midst of a series of Lenten sermons tracing Israel's wilderness journey; and our theme this morning is 'Freedom from grumbling/Freedom for gratitude'. And you should have a slip of paper on which you are invited to register something you have been, are or ought to be grateful to God for, and something about which you are conscious of having done an unhelpful amount of grumbling. And yes, they can be one and the same thing. And no, we won't be collecting the slips of paper in at the end!

One of the pleasures of reading a good story, or watching our favourite serial on TV or on Netflix, is that of reacting to its central characters, getting ourselves worked up and becoming excited or frustrated or anxious or irritated as we see them doing and saying and suffering things. Part of the pleasure, of course, is precisely that it's *them* and not us doing and saying and suffering things, and yet we have the lingering awareness that it *might* be us, and our judgement of them is, deep down, linked closely to an awareness of our own frailties and foibles and fantasies.

It would be tempting, I think, as we read our Old Testament lesson this morning, to be straining at the leash to judge Israel and their ungrateful moaning and whingeing and their carping criticism of Moses and Aaron pretty harshly. They are, we might reasonably suppose, deserving of a good slap, given all that they have recently been through. So, before I suggest that this is not an *entirely fair* judgement (though not entirely *unfair* either) let's remind ourselves again for a moment, of their situation as we pick up their story at the beginning of Exodus chapter 16.

As the book of Exodus opens, as we saw just a few weeks ago, we find Israel, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, in Egypt taking part in one of Pharaoh's 'back to work' schemes. They are slaves, forced into hard labour by cruel taskmasters, and, we are told, their lives are bitter. The bitterness extends beyond the endless toil. Because the Hebrews are also *numerous*, Pharaoh adopts a nasty bit of *Realpolitik* to ensure that they will present no future threat to his political stability. *Daughters* born to Hebrew women are permitted to live, but any *sons* born, he orders, are to be put to death. The people cry out in their bondage and sufferings, and the sound of their groaning reaches heaven; and God, remembering his covenant with their ancestor Abraham, promises to deliver them from their dreadful plight.

Fast-forward now to chapter 14, and, as we saw just last week, we find this promise fulfilled in spades. Israel does a runner, and despite the seemingly overwhelming odds against them, they escape across a stretch of dangerous water which miraculously parts to permit their crossing, but rushes back to swallow up the army of their pursuing oppressors. And so, they find themselves

at long last beyond Egypt's political borders, on the Sinai peninsula in the wilderness of Sin (which, incidentally, despite a delicious irony, has nothing to do with 'sin' at all, but simply means the area of desert adjacent to Mt Sinai).

Here, realizing what has happened to them, and how God has saved them from Pharaoh, we are told 'the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses', who had orchestrated the escape. So relieved and so grateful are they that they spend more or less the whole of chapter 15 singing a great hymn of praise: 'The Lord is my strength and my song, and has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him ...' On and on it goes for 21 verses until they must all have been worn out. And then, within three days and a single verse, they take stock of their new surroundings, discover that the water tastes funny, and the *grumbling* begins! Three days!! That's all it takes for the excitement of deliverance and coming to terms with the reality of that life out of Egypt that they had wanted and prayed for so long to wear thin, and for the realities of their new situation to begin to dawn on them. And the grumbling begins.

And the grumbling grows in scale and intensity, and it gradually shifts from mere grumbling to the apportionment of blame, until, just six weeks into their new life as a free people (with all the challenges and responsibilities that go with that) it turns nasty, and invidious comparisons with their old way of life begin to rear their head: 'What on earth did you bring out to this godforsaken place for Moses? This is all your fault. It was you who persuaded us to leave behind the life we had before. It may not have been much, but at least there we got two square meals a day and a place to sleep, whereas out here there's ... well, nothing! Better to have died a slave in old age than to starve prematurely in this dump!'

As I say, it's tempting to want to give them a good slap and bring them to their senses, given what they have recently been through. What's remarkable at first blush is their apparent *lack of gratitude*, their remarkable selective amnesia and capacity to turn the recent horrors of their years in Egypt into something much more cosy and comfortable, and their utter lack of trust in the God who has only recently moved heaven and earth to bring them here. From one point of view it's breathtaking in its stupidity, its arrogance and its blasphemy. Though of course it's not God who gets it in the neck. In the people's perception, God has slipped conveniently into the background, and it is Moses who meets the torrent of abuse and anger.

If we're not to judge this harshly—or not with unqualified harshness anyway—then I think we need to bear in mind the following. First, these are very early days in Israel's relationship with God. God reveals himself to Moses in chapter 3 of Exodus, and then announces that he is going to release Israel from captivity. This is bound to seem like a good idea to everyone except the Egyptians (who get a rough deal out of the whole thing); but Jacob's descendants haven't yet learned anything much about God's character, other than that he is powerful enough to wipe the floor with Pharaoh's stormtroopers. It's the stuff of a Sylvester Stallone movie, but hardly yet a deep and meaningful religious relationship.

And secondly, Israel is just beginning to learn again what it's like to be free and responsible, rather than slaves whose every material need was met, even if only to a very basic standard. Food, drink, shelter – all these were there for them in Egypt. So, it was a challenge, and a serious challenge, to find themselves suddenly in the middle of nowhere with no obvious sort of food, no clean drinking water, and no survival manual. My guess is that, although we are hardly slaves, many of us—who are used to getting our provisions from Morrisons, Aldi or Tesco—would struggle just as hard to know what to do next in similar circumstances, and might be just as prone to complain if our debit card and pin number were ever revealed to be the worthless bits of plastic they really are apart from the system into which we are locked and upon which we rely. Take that away, and most of us, too, would be complaining, making invidious and petulant comparisons, and praying that Bear Grylls might turn up at any moment to sort everything out.

So, judge Israel harshly as we may, we inevitably find ourselves once again suspecting deep down that, 'there but for the grace of God' we ourselves would be bound to go, and perhaps, in our own admittedly different circumstances, in some sense have gone, do go and may yet go again. So, there's a lesson here, in other words, for us to learn about ourselves, and not just about ancient Israel.

Sometimes the life of a Christian congregation can resemble this story, as can our lives as individual believers. After a period of particular struggle, and feeling bound by constraints of one sort or another, people can lose heart, sensing that all is not right, and find themselves crying out to God for release; for a new lease of life; for a fresh vision; for a renewed sense of joy and hope and energy and direction. The grass on the other side of the fence not only looks greener, it *is* greener; and we long for the chance to feel it under our feet. And then something happens, something sudden and unexpected, something seemingly God-given. For a congregation, perhaps it's a new ministry, a new Rector, a new bishop even! In the life of an individual perhaps it's an unsolicited change of lifestyle, or job, or relationship—not something we would ever have planned; but when it comes, it seems to afford a chance for a new start, an opportunity to let go of some things that we sense were wrong and were holding us back, a chance to get out of a rut, or a compulsive pattern, or an unhealthy situation. And we're grateful! We really are! We may not sing about it for a whole chapter as Israel does, but we know that this change of fortune, whatever it is, comes to us as something God-given; and while things are rarely neat and tidy and unequivocally good in life (we need to remember those Egyptians swallowed up in the waves as they pursued the escaping slaves), we are thankful for the good things that come out of whatever our own personal or congregational Exodus might be; and we give thanks to God, and celebrate!

Before long, though, the risks of embracing this fresh start in our life start to manifest themselves. The implications of the changes we so gladly embraced when we were up against it begin to impinge, and somehow the chafing they cause is more uncomfortable than we had supposed it might be when it lay on the other side of the fence, hidden amongst all that green grass. Or the new leadership proves to be even newer and more *avant garde* than it had looked

when we were comparing it to life under Pharaoh's regime, not only guiding us successfully out of the unpleasantness of Egypt, but leading us into a seeming wilderness with all the dangers and demands and discomfort of that—urging upon us more newness, more change, more openness, more self-sacrifice, more risk than we had bargained for. And how easy it is, when faced with these unfamiliar, scary, and uncomfortable circumstances, for our initial gratitude and enthusiasm to give way, for our remembering of the past's ills to be photo-shopped into an altogether more sanguine picture (something bordering, even, on nostalgia!), and for the grumbling to begin. Wouldn't it 'have been better' we wonder to ourselves, and then to others quietly, and then less quietly, and then to passing acquaintances in the supermarket, 'wouldn't it have been better to have died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we ate bread to the full. Whereas ... *you* have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us all with hunger!'

They say you should be careful what you pray for, because you might just get it. How often does such 'wondering', with its tacit or explicit complaint and accusation, provide the chuntering counterpoint to our original prayers, and to the praise and celebration that resounded when those prayers seemed to be being answered? When the good thing we thought God was doing for us turns out, as it happens, not to be all about what we want, or what we would prefer after all; or when the exciting new opportunity, energy and direction prove not to be restricted by our expectations that it would simply be a lightly modified version of the familiar and comfortable. Give us Egypt any day of the week, we say. But of course we don't really mean it. Egypt is part of our past, not part of our present, let alone part of our future. And we can't live in the past; not except by denying the reality of the fact that things have moved on, and that God is calling us to move on.

In the story, what seems like a dire situation turns out in reality to be the occasion for a marvellous provision by God for the people's every need. And, gradually, with this realization that things really aren't so bad, the mood shifts again (eventually!) from grumbling to gratitude.

God is faithful and provides. Don't make the mistake of supposing that the Quail and the Manna were capricious responses to the application of pester power! I'm confident that this provision was premeditated, already there in God's intended portfolio of giving to the people. If only they had not resorted so quickly to complaining and questioning the wisdom of having left Egypt in the first place, the story might read very differently. And it enjoins us, next time we face something exciting and new that we have been praying for and then suddenly turns up, not only to think long and hard about the consequences of receiving it from God's hand, but to ensure that our gratitude in doing so is not just backward looking, but trusts, too, for God's continued provision as we move forward. Because only in that way will we really be set free for gratitude, and set free from what is, whether in personal or congregational life, a corrosive culture of grumbling.