

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **Numbers 20: 2-13**
 Psalm 6
 Philippians 3: 7-21
 Luke 6: 17-26

In our Epistle last week, Paul instructed the Philippians not to ‘grumble’. We have seen, in recent Old Testament readings that the Israelites were a nation of ‘grumblers’. Today we have another example of their grumbling and complaining to Moses and Aaron.

It wasn’t the first time! If we look at the account of the Israelites leaving Egypt as recorded in Exodus we find repeated examples of ‘grumbling’. Ahead of the departing Israelites went the angel of God and the pillar of cloud and light; they did not go directly through Philistine country (if conflict had broken out they may well have turned back to Egypt) but were led toward the Red Sea by the desert road. Pharaoh had agreed to their going following the first-born deaths on ‘Passover’ night but as on so many previous encounters with Moses he went back on his decision (chapter 14) – the Egyptians had lost the “services” of a whole nation! As the pursuing army caught up there was consternation and ‘grumbling’:

⁰As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD.

¹¹They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?’ ¹²Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, “Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians”?

It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’

The pillar of cloud moved from the front to the rear of the column, protecting it from the Egyptians until they had crossed the Red Sea. Safe on the other side, they move off into the desert and after 3 days arrive at the bitter water of Marah: (Exodus 15)

²²Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they travelled in the desert without finding water. ²³When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter.

(That is why the place is called Marah.) ²⁴So the people **grumbled** against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’

²⁵Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

If it wasn’t water it was Food – on the 15th day of the second month after leaving Egypt: (Exodus 16)

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. ²In the desert the whole community **grumbled** against Moses and Aaron. ³The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’

Manna and Quail were provided and we read that the Israelite nation ate manna for the forty years of their wandering in the desert:

³¹The people of Israel called the bread manna (*manna* sounds like the Hebrew for *What is it?*). It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. ³²Moses said, ‘This is what the LORD has commanded: “Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come, so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the wilderness when I brought you out of Egypt.”’

³³So Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the LORD to be kept for the generations to come.’

³⁴As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna with the tablets of the covenant law, that it might be preserved. ³⁵The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.

In Exodus 17, water, or the lack of it, is again the cause of the ‘grumbling’:

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²So they quarrelled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’

Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?’

³But the people were thirsty for water there, and they **grumbled** against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’

⁴Then Moses cried out to the LORD, ‘What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.’

⁵The LORD answered Moses, ‘Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

⁶I will stand there before you by the rock at **Horeb**.

Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.’

So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷And he called the place **Massah** (*testing*) and

Meribah (*quarrelling*) because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

Does this account in Exodus refer to the same incident as recorded in Numbers 20 – our reading today?

A footnote in the NIV Study Bible places the two occasions when water came from rock forty years apart, the first early in the Exodus story, the second nearing the arrival at Canaan. (Compare Numbers 20:1 with Numbers 33:38)

The Israelites are once again desperate for water and start to quarrel with Moses – the usual argument; “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to this desolate place? Comparative well-being in ‘slavery’, in Egypt is implied in the argument put forward.

The response is, as so often before; “The Lord provides – Water in abundance from the rock”.

There is one major difference between the two accounts; a difference with significant and far-reaching consequences if in fact they do refer to the same incident.

In Exodus the Lord instructs Moses to take the staff used to turn the waters of the Nile to blood; go to the rock, accompanied by some of the elders, and strike the rock to bring forth the water.

In Numbers we read:

⁷The LORD said to Moses, ⁸‘Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together.

Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so that they and their livestock can drink.’

⁹So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence, just as he commanded him.

¹⁰**He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, ‘Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?’**

¹¹**Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff.** Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

The Lord intended HIS WORD, spoken before the whole assembly, to bring water from the rock. Moses does not follow the Lord’s instruction – he appears to be at his ‘wits end’ with the people of Israel, rails at them and as NIV footnotes suggest – “in his rage strikes the rock twice with his staff”. Look at verse 10 above where he says: “must **we** bring water out of this rock”.

Who are **we** in this question? Does he mean Moses and Aaron as leaders, has he forgotten the Lord as instrumental in what is about to happen?

This is the moment when Moses and Aaron are told that they will not enter the Promised Land – their action has displayed a lack of trust in the Lord and did not give honour to the Lord in front of His people. It may even have shown an element of self reliance.

We are unlikely to be called on to demonstrate our trust in the Lord in such a public manner but it is worth questioning the extent of our reliance on the Lord – is there also, in us, that element of self reliance which Moses may have shown?

Early Christian Liturgical tradition grouped 7 from the total of 150 as ‘the Penitential Psalms’. Psalm 6 is one of these, along with numbers 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143.

The opening verses of psalm 6 and psalm 38 are identical:

¹ LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.

Both psalms go on to imply that David, the author, was suffering physical illness and oppression from his enemies.

Psalm 38, more directly than psalm 6, speaks of the Lord inflicting this illness:

²Your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down on me.

³Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.

David has sinned and he has been ‘disciplined’ by the Lord – there is, however, no mention of the specific illness or the sin which has been the cause. This is also true in psalm 6 – one Commentator has said:

In a strict sense, however, it is not a ‘Penitence Psalm’, as there is no confession of sin or prayer for forgiveness. The psalm can be categorized as an ‘*individual lament*’ psalm. It is not possible to be certain of its original setting. Throughout the first part the psalmist speaks of personal suffering so intense that he may collapse. He prays that God may heal him and no longer be angry.

The first seven verses of the psalm express depression and despair, and then in the final three verses there is a sudden change to a mood of confidence in the Lord. Doctor Knight, in the Daily Study Bible, writes:

When Martin Luther was shut up in Wartburg Castle he knew such periods of depression. So what did he do? On one occasion he threw his ink-pot at the devil, and then suddenly all was well. At other times he shouted aloud “Baptizatus sum” “I have been baptized” – and then all the devils of depression and fear were helpless.

The poet Cowper put it differently. Like John Wesley he knew the power of song. And so he wrote:

“Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings.”

But whatever happens to each individual, the *sudden* change of heart is an act, not of man, but of God.

Increasingly during this pandemic we are hearing of the deep psychological problems being suffered by many people, caused by ‘lock-down’, family strain (home schooling etc.), unemployment, financial worries etc. Let us pray that they may find the confidence, peace and hope that we experience as Christians, trusting in the Lord.

The opening words of our epistle follow on from the closing verses of psalm 6:

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

The NIV offers an alternative translation for “*through faith in Christ*” in verse 9 – “*through the faithfulness of Christ*”.

Charles Wesley takes up this theme in the hymn that is sung each year at the opening of Conference –

That hymn is number 456 in STF - “And are we yet alive”. He writes in verse 6:

Let us take up the cross,
till we the crown obtain;
and gladly reckon all things loss,
so we may Jesus gain.

Wesley speaks of “taking up the cross till we the crown obtain”; in similar vein Paul writes of being on a journey that has not yet been completed:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. **But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,**

¹⁴ I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

When I read verse 14 I am reminded of a time in Croydon many years ago. Friends had been to a summer Bible Camp and introduced us to a song which had been popular during the week in their Camp – a song based on Pauline theology from 2 Timothy chapter 4 and Philippians chapter 3:

I will fight the fight,
I will run the race,
I will press on towards the goal.
I will fight the fight,
I will run the race,
I will press on towards the goal.
**I will take hold of that for which
The Lord took hold of me.**

Paul urges the Philippians to follow his example, warning them (an echo of David in his psalms) that they live among many enemies of their faith. He concludes the passage with a confident statement of the Christian Hope and Belief.

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Immediately before our reading from Luke 6, we read how Jesus had gone out to a mountainside and spent a whole night praying to His Father. In the morning he called His disciples and chose **from them** the twelve designated apostles. This explains the opening verse of our reading:

¹⁷ He went down with **them** (*the twelve 'new' apostles*) and stood on a level place. **A large crowd of his disciples*** was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.

* (*The large crowd of disciples is presumably the disciples from whom Jesus has called the apostles.*)

After a time of healing the sick, Jesus addresses His disciples and delivers Luke’s record of the Beatitudes (sometimes described as part of the Sermon on the Plain). In the more familiar (?) account in Matthew – the Sermon on the Mount – we read:

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus tells His disciples that eight groups of people are ‘Blessed’ – Happy yet far more than happy; experiencing an ultimate well-being and spiritual joy.

In Luke Jesus only picks out three groups of people who are ‘Blessed’ – the poor, the hungry and those who currently weep. He has looked at His disciples in delivering these ‘Beatitudes’ and in each case has made them personal to those who hear Him – “Blessed are **you** who

We also find there are four statements that start – “**Woe to you** who

²⁴ ‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

How do we ‘measure up’ – what is our relative wealth and how do we use it; are we content with adequate food, do we eat to excess, do we waste food; are we happy and joyous in life (entertainment ‘on tap’); are we well regarded?

In Matthew’s account Jesus has added one further ‘Blessed’ to the list of eight – the verse emboldened above. In Luke we read something similar:

²² **Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.**

We are followers of Jesus; we desire to live and act according to His will.

Because you are a Christian have you ever been **insulted, hated, excluded, rejected, persecuted or the victim of false accusations?**

The disciples were warned to expect all of these things – we know that many of them also suffered in physical terms, even to the extent of giving their lives. Perhaps our biggest danger today, as Christians, is facing ‘apathy’ or total disinterest – we are not likely to experience the list above unless we are prepared to ‘stick our heads above the parapet’ and bring an unwelcome message to the society in which we live.

What is Jesus saying to us today, what are we being asked to do?

All to Jesus I surrender,
all to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.

*I surrender all,
I surrender all,
All to Thee, my blessed Saviour,
I surrender all.*

All to Jesus I surrender,
Humbly at His feet I bow;
worldly pleasures all forsaken,
Take me, Jesus, take me now.

All to Jesus I surrender,
Make me, Saviour, wholly Thine;
let me feel the Holy Spirit,
Truly know that Thou art mine.

All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord, I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power,
Let Thy blessing fall on me.

All to Jesus I surrender,
Now I feel the sacred flame;
O the joy of full salvation!
Glory, glory to His name!

Judson W. Van DeVenter

Jesus, I fain would find
Thy zeal for God in me,
Thy yearning pity for mankind,
Thy burning charity.

In me Thy Spirit dwell;
In me Thy mercies move:
So shall the fervour of my zeal
Be Thy pure flame of love.

Charles Wesley

O loving Lord, who art for ever seeking
Those of Thy mind, intent to do Thy will,
Strong in Thy strength, Thy power and grace bespeaking,
Faithful to Thee, through good report and ill -

To Thee we come, and humbly make confession,
Faithless so oft, in thought and word and deed,
Asking that we may have, in true possession,
Thy free forgiveness in the hour of need.

In duties small be thou our inspiration,
In large affairs endue us with Thy might;
Through faithful service cometh full salvation;
So may we serve, Thy will our chief delight,

Not disobedient to the heavenly vision,
Faithful in all things, seeking not reward;
Then, following Thee, may we fulfil our mission,
True to ourselves, our neighbours, and our Lord.

William Vaughan Jenkins