



Sermon

1st October 2023

Grumbling or Unity in Humility

Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-16

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I have commented before that the Lectionary passages have their own logical progress and do not normally relate to a common idea. Today, however, a theme clearly emerges.

Old Testament Passage

Let's get some perspective on the Old Testament passage. After escaping from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, they had travelled 3 days to Marah where the water was salty, so they grumbled against Moses, saying what shall we drink?¹ God acted to sweeten the water.

They moved on to a place where, as we heard last week, they complained about having no food. Suddenly in their minds their forced labour as slaves in Egypt had been luxurious – they fantasised that they had all the wanted to eat and pots of meat.

This was just 30 days after the leaving Egypt. There, in Chapter 16, God gave them quail to eat in the evening and commenced the daily provision of manna which continued for 40 years.

They had seen the ten miraculous plagues of Egypt by which God freed from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of Pharaoh's army. They had God's presence leading them in a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. Yet how quickly they complained when trying circumstances arose.

After the giving of the daily bread, the manna, Number 33:14-16 informs us that they camped at two sites before reaching the place of today's account, Rephidim. We don't know how long that took, but my point is that this is not very long since they left Egypt. Somewhere around 40 days perhaps. Again those previous miraculous events are forgotten!

Now they were thirsty and they quarrelled with Moses. Did you hear the repetition of 'quarrel'? The people **quarrelled** with Moses saying "Give us water to drink!" Moses asked why they **quarrelled** with him. But they were thirsty and the **grumbled** against Moses. Finally, that place was named **Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarrelling)** because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"²

Well, God provided water by having Moses strike the rock at Horeb and water gushed out providing for them and their flocks. God is faithful.

I noticed in Exodus 16, last week's passage, that at that time as so often before and afterwards, God said to them that then they would know, "I am the LORD **your** God."³

Think about it: "I am the LORD **your** God." The Almighty, self-existent, living, Creator God identified himself as **their** God. That is a great promise for them and in turn for us. The Almighty says he is our God. He acknowledges relationship between himself and his people. When things are tough, you can remind yourself, that God is your God and you are His. He takes that relationship seriously. You can put your trust in Him. And trust is the opposite of grumbling.

¹ Exodus 15:24

² Exodus 17:7

³ Numbers 14:12

It is clear that God does not like grumbling in his people. In “The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament⁴,” Dr Laird Harris has this to say about their grumbling:

[The word used] means to express resentment, dissatisfaction, anger, and complaint by grumbling in half-muted tones of hostile opposition to God's leaders and the authority which he has invested in them.

The true nature of this murmuring is seen in the fact that it is an open act of rebellion against the Lord (Num 14:9) and a stubborn refusal to believe God's word and God's miraculous works (Num 14:11, 22, 23). Thus the right attitude in real difficulty is unconditional acceptance and obedience. God's own must never stand in judgment upon him.

Gospel Passage

Yet as we turn to the Gospel reading, we find exactly such judgement expressed against our Lord. Here the setting is the last week before the crucifixion. He has done countless miracles including, a week, before raising Lazarus back to life. The Triumphal Entry had happened, he had cleansed the Temple, thrown over the traders' tables and driven out the money-changers.

It was in this situation that the authorities questioned him about the source of his authority. We have been told earlier in the Gospel account that they had resolved to kill him. This, then, was an attempt to ensnare him. Had he answered it was God, they could have accused him of blasphemy. Any other answer would damage his standing before the people.

Jesus answered with his own question as a condition of responding. What about John's baptism – was it from heaven or from men? If they answered it was from heaven, they would answer their question about Jesus, because John had testified to Jesus as the Lamb of God. If they denied the authority of John, then the people would be outraged because they believed John was a prophet.

In fact, Jesus did not avoid the question, because any honest seeker of truth would not fail to see who he was and would know that John had declared him to be the Messiah. To make the point more strongly, Jesus went on to tell three parables, the first of which we heard.

The parable of the two sons poses the question: who is obedient - the one who says he will obey but doesn't or the one who says he will not obey but does? It is made more shocking when Jesus explained it. He identifies those who said they would not obey with the sinners of society: the tax collectors and prostitutes. The tax-collectors were Jews who served the Roman oppressors and greedily extorted excessive taxes from their own people. These types were repenting and entering the Kingdom of God. While the leaders he was addressing, were those who said they would obey but did not. They had seen John's ministry and not repented while those other despised sinners had.

Bishop Peter Carrell in his blog comments:

Sometimes Christians take a 'pick 'n' choose' approach to what parts of the gospel we take as coming directly 'from God' and what parts we treat as 'optional, up to each of us to do as we see fit in our own eyes.'

Is Jesus challenging us today about the way in which we respond to God?

The church to which we belong: is it being shaped by us to suit ourselves more than allowing God to shape it for God's glory?

That's a challenging question! Are we shaping St Stephen's to suit ourselves more than allowing God to shape it to his glory?

⁴ “The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament”, by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, originally published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois, Copyright © 1980.

Philippians

We have seen an example of grumbling against God in the Old Testament. We have seen an instance in the Gospel where Jesus (himself God) was grumbled against and worse. Perhaps surprisingly, the problem is also addressed in the reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians along with an answer!

Let's look at Philippians 2:14 – 16, the next two verses after the set reading.

Philippians 2:14-16 ¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold on to the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing.

We humans have a tendency to complain. The Apostle Paul tells us not to let it dominate our attitude. He says that if we can avoid complaining and arguing, we will become blameless and pure and a marked contrast to the people around us. We will shine like stars in the night sky as we hold onto the word of life. This still needs to be read with verses 12-13 in mind. What are they?

¹²Therefore ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

“Work out your salvation” – what does that mean? I once heard a preacher say it meant you should not tell anyone how to be saved, but let them work it out for themselves. No! He means you have salvation as a free gift, so make it effective all through your life. To use theological language justification needs to be followed by sanctification. God declares the believer to be saved and forgiven, now work with God so your life reflects the transformation of your inner being.

Verse 13: “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

Don't complain because God is at work in your life to fulfill his good purpose. Don't grumble against what God is doing.

Now if we go back to the beginning of Philippians 2, we find Paul describing the opposite of this grumbling, the opposite of the quarrelling at Meribah, the opposite of the attitude of the leaders who tried to trap Jesus in the gospel passage:

Hear it again from N.T. Wright's translation, Philippians 2:1-4 [New Testament for Everyone ©2011 Nicholas Thomas Wright]:

So if our shared life in the Messiah brings you any comfort; if love still has the power to make you cheerful; if we really do have a partnership in the spirit; if your hearts are at all moved with affection and sympathy— ²then make my joy complete! Bring your thinking into line with one another.

Here's how to do it. Hold on to the same love; bring your innermost lives into harmony; fix your minds on the same object. ³Never act out of selfish ambition or vanity; instead, regard everybody else as your superior. ⁴Look after each other's best interests, not your own.

That is unity! Paul goes on to give the example of Christ taking on human form, living a life on earth and being obedient even to death on the cross. This is a glorious passage which deserves multiple sermons of its own. But if we struggle with this call to unity and humility we have the resources spelt out. Firstly, from verse 1:

- We are unified with Christ – would that help you be more ready to serve, more humble?
- We have the comfort of his love for us. Would that sustain you when you need to put aside your own wishes?
- We participate in the Holy Spirit who indwells us and empowers us in this Christian life.

These are immense resources on which we can draw: Christ, his love, the Holy Spirit. If that is not enough, we are given the example of Jesus, who valued others far above himself – he who came from the uttermost heights of glory and majesty.

We started with the Israelites grumbling against God in the wilderness because there was no water. We moved onto hear the religious leaders trying to trap Jesus into a statement they could use against him as they sought grounds to have him executed.

I close with these words of the glorified Christ. Paul has taken Old Testament words about God Almighty and applied them to Christ. Follow along with me: Philippians 2:9-11

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

We are offered the resources to avoid grumbling, complaining or arguing. Here are the foundations for our unity and willingness to love one another:

We are united with him.
We are indwelt by his Spirit.
We are comforted by his love.
We are assured that we are his people.