

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2017

What a deal of grumbling in our readings today! The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.' There's just no pleasing some folk, having been liberated from Egypt and given their freedom they are complaining about the food! I have been wondering about these Egyptian fleshpots; I googled fleshpot: a place of lascivious entertainment — usually used in the plural. Perhaps there was a bakery next door! I digress!

We are often told that we live in an age of entitlement, but I wonder if those who say such things have read the Book of Exodus, clearly it has been a problem since time immemorial. It is often said that those of Gen Y - I think they were the ones who became adults at the turn of the century, have an over inflated sense of entitlement. They want it all, but they aren't really prepared to put in the hard yards we are told. There is probably some truth in all this, with some of that generation. But I am sure that similar things have been said about every new generation. I feel quite sure that my parents said it about me. We are all a product of our upbringing and who brought up the current generation! So we need to be careful in apportioning blame!

Researchers believe that the problem with Gen Y stems from them being constantly told from birth they are special, one Professor wrote that the sense of entitlement 'gets ingrained in the formative years.' 'It stems from the self-esteem movement, telling kids, "You're great, you're special"'. And as a result many now believe it - and will ignore anybody who says otherwise. But far from making them happy their approach to life leads to higher levels of depression and "chronic disappointment" as unjustified levels of self-esteem masks the sometimes ugly reality. Does this not ring true when we consider the story of the Exodus? These are God's chosen, they are indeed special and yet there is deep disappointment, unhappiness, impatience.

It needs to be recognised that each one of us, in our own way, is indeed special. Specialness can't be measured, each of us is different; but our unique specialness requires from us a unique response. In Luke's gospel we read: From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. Those who have been blessed, entrusted with specialness, like the liberated Hebrews, will find that though their lives may be blessed they will from time to time be called upon to deal with the painful and the inexplicable. Real specialness cannot be earned, but demands response, it demands that we reach beyond ourselves. It is otherwise rather empty and yes, disappointing.

During the week I was flicking through my news feed and an article caught my eye. The headline read: 'For modern witches, the occult provides something the church can't.' Hmm...interesting, my mind wandered and I considered what their 'happy hour' looks like, probably makes ours look a little sedate to say the least! Anyway I

read down and an academic studying modern occultism wrote: 'Where religion requires subservience and sacrificing oneself to a higher power, magic doesn't; it's about empowering the self, and that appeals to a lot of people'. Whilst that statement might be accurate of some religions, it is not true of Christianity.

It is true in the Christian tradition we are told that we need to point away from self: the vocation of all the saints from John the Baptist onwards was to point away from themselves to Christ; the distinctively Anglican icon of Mary that of 'Our Lady of Walsingham' always has Christ at the fore, Mary presenting him to the world. Of course Christ in turn points away from himself to the God that he called Father, Abba. But whilst we turn to God in worship, in our Christian ethic we point to each other and self – love your neighbour *as yourself* and in doing so we are truly Christian and we are truly Church, we can be neither *on our own*. We cannot separate our worship of God, what our academic mistakenly calls 'subservience and sacrificing oneself to a higher power', from our corporate lives, our communion, our koinonia... from each other and from self. They are the two sides of the same coin.

Today's gospel passage is an intriguing, fascinating parable. On one level is totally unfair; but we are dealing here with 'Grace.' And grace is all about God's presence, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, freely given, though unmerited, fortunately for us grace is not about fairness. Our parable tells us that God's grace is not something that we can negotiate or calculate, and this is where our faith can collide with the world around us. And I deliberately don't say with our modern world, because this is what was happening to Moses in the wilderness. So while we may speak of God's grace, how might we know it? What exactly is that Denarius that all those workers received? What does it represent? What is that *thing* that can be neither negotiated nor calculated?

Ultimately that *thing* which is given, the thing we cannot negotiate or calculate is our own selves. Our own selves just as we are: our life, temperament, family, heredity, time and place, everything we happen to be that we cannot change. The problem is that we grumble and complain about those with whom God has dealt differently, and when we do that, when we fail to respect that same *thing* within them, then we are refusing to accept our own selves. The Denarius is the grace of God, given to us by the God who from time to time may ask... 'do you begrudge my generosity?' This is our life's work to accept ourselves as the mysteriously, gradually revealed gift of the eternal generosity of God and of course recognise and accept that same gift in others. Our acceptance of ourselves and others including that which is painful and mysterious is the gift of grace; is this wisdom not the foundation of the Christian life.

We live in our society in which there are issues over 'my entitlement,' 'my rights' and 'my identity' and their misuse, we are becoming more polarised. We need to be reminded of the words of St Paul who wrote 'By the *grace of God* I am what I am.' For this grace, in ourselves and in each other, we need above all to be accepting and grateful. Amen.