

Grumbling in the Face of Grace
Sermon for Sunday 20 September 2020
Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Rev Hamish Galloway

Text: Exodus 16:1-15
Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction:

How do you feel about complaining, winging, grumbling behaviour?

Paul Molitor, US baseball legend, didn't like it to the point that he coined an oft repeated phrase:

"Complaining is like vomiting. You might feel better after you get it out, but you make everyone else around you sick"

I think this is really relevant at the moment! Grumbling in the face of grace! Here in NZ we have done better handling COVID-19 than almost any nation in the world and yet our news is dominated, it seems, by complaints about what is going wrong and what could be done better. How do you deal with that? We record the news so that we can push fast forward if it is getting whingey! But is that the best way? Our scriptures today give us a great window into this issue. Let's have a look.

Firstly the Exodus passage, set just 4 – 6 weeks after the miraculous escape from Egypt and the closing grasp of the Pharaoh's army, through the Red Sea, into the desert, on their way to freedom. This was an experience of Amazing Grace! Yet, 4 weeks in the *murmurings* began; see verse 2, "The whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron".

The word murmurings is accurate in identifying how a complaining culture gets started. You begin to hear little murmurings of unrest that are like sparks that catch fire!

I want to examine the motivations here, because I think it helps us get under the surface and see what's going on. So why, given the very recent experience of God's delivering grace, were they into complaining?

On the surface, it could be about hunger! The food was running out! But it was more than this, it was also -

- Fear and uncertainty – they had left the relative security of life in Egypt where there were regular meals on the table and now they were in the desert and not sure of where they were headed! They were way outside their comfort zones.
- Leadership anxiety – they had put a lot of trust in Moses and Aaron and were understandably questioning whether they had put their trust in the right leaders. Did they actually know what they were doing or had they lead them up the garden path into a hopeless oppressive desert and wilderness; out of the frying pan into the fire so to speak!
- Memory lapse! There is a very telling bit where they lament wax lyrical about the meat they ate in Egypt! This was rose tinted glasses in the extreme! Regular feeds of meat was not a standard of diet that slaves in Egypt would have been able to attain! As one commentator puts it, "complaints have their natural exaggerations." In this case they were 4 weeks post miraculous God inspired escape and they have forgotten, moving so quickly from praise and wonder to murmuring and complaint!

Do you see these kinds of motivations in our present cultures of complaint?

- Fear caused by uncertainty about the future
- Anxiety about leadership and directions.
- Complaint driven by poor memory and exaggerations.

How does God respond here?

1. God heard them (v.9)
2. God calls upon them to remember correctly (v.6) Note – this is a constant theme of Exodus and Deuteronomy: *“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord led you to freedom.”*
3. God acts with more gracious provision -
An abundance of quails in the evening and bread like manna in the morning.

Now these 2 food sources were not unnatural miracles. Quails migrated across the Sinai Peninsula in great number, alighting at night to rest and easily taken at that point. The manna was a sweet secretion from insects found in bushes that populated this wilderness area. The secretion would form sweet sticky white droplets that hardened overnight.

The grace, provision and miracle was in the timing! At the point of need, provision! It must have been so heartening!

Hope Presbyterian, where I was previously ministering, is starting a funeral business. To do so funding was required. A key investor was found but we were still \$20,000 short. I had one quite remarkable day. Early in the day, before breakfast, I had an email from the major investor saying he was running out of patience, that unless we had the additional \$20,000 by 5pm the next night he was withdrawing. I was depressed! That afternoon I was on a pastoral visit when the couple I was with handed me an envelope and said they had been praying for the church and felt led to give this for the funeral business. It was 5oz of pure gold! We sold it for just over \$20,000. Quite apart from anything else, this experience of what seemed like God’s gracious timely provision boosted my faith enormously!

So God hears, calls them to remember correctly and he graciously encourages them with tangible provision.

Fast forward a little in the Old Testament and you get to a very similar incident in Jonah.

He has preached doom and destruction to the people of Ninevah because God aggressively called him to do that! Then God relents and graciously spares the people of Ninevah! What does Jonah do in the face of this Amazing Grace? He grumbles!

“Jonah was not happy that God had saved the city. Jonah became angry. He complained to the Lord...” (Jonah 4:1)

This is a man who only days earlier had been miraculously delivered from the belly of a big fish. How quickly he forgot, how unprepared he was to allow others the benefit of gracious rescue! Why, what motivated him?

- Pride – he had preached destruction and now he looked foolish and wrong.
- Bigotry – he actually had no time for these heathen people and would have been happy to see them burn!

How did God respond?

1. He let him stew in the hot sun, exaggerating his misery!
2. He then calmly pointed out the facts of the situation. Actually Johan, more than 120,000 people have been saved here, yet you are wallowing in your own pathetic misery! (4:10)

Can we see motivations for our own complaining culture here – personal pride and selfishness? Bigotry towards others?

Then we can fast forward again to the parable in Matthew 20 where the workers who only did the last hour of the day got the same pay as the ones who worked hard all day in the hot sun! and what did they do? They *grumbled* (v.11)

What motivated them?

- There was clearly an element of injustice here! no doubt, they felt that this was unfair.
- But also, more sinister, was jealousy. Literally, in the text is the idea that they looked on the others with an evil eye. The thought was, if we had known that we could have had the same pay for 1 hour's work in the coolness of dusk!

So motivations for complaint here are injustice and jealousy. How does God respond?

Basically 2 things emerge:

Firstly, embedded in the story is another more correct narrative for anyone who knew the truth about the context. Here is the truth:

- a) There was often huge pressure to get the ripe grape harvest in and even 1 hours work late in the day could be hugely valuable.
- b) These later workers were not idlers. They would have been queuing up all day in the market place hoping to pick up some work.
- c) The wage paid was a daily living wage for a family; each person there was therefore enabled to put food on his family's table that night.

These are the facts and they tell a different story from the story of injustice spouted by the complainers.

Secondly, God responds freely and graciously because he is able and motivated to do so! He is basically saying here "What right do you have to grumble in the face of grace?"

Yet all these stories are examples of just thatgrumbling in the face of grace!

And these stories go on in our context; I see grumbling in the face of grace alive and well in Aotearoa and in our churches today!

How to deal to this learn from God's responses here.

1. Listen and understand – in every situation, Exodus, Jonah, Jesus' parable, the complaining is only the surface expression of deeper feeling, whether it be uncertainty and fear, bigotry and pride, sense of entitlement and jealousy. We need to also have the emotional intelligence to see what is really going on.
Much of the complaint in the COVID environment, and certainly the extremes of alarmist conspiracy theories that are murmuring away under the surface, are driven by uncertainty about the future and fear. I think it helps to understand this.

2. Establish the correct narrative here! A narrative of grace and hope!

Note on that is driven by fear and rumour, nor distorted memory. The call is to remember God's past actions and trust him for the future! The call is to get an objective and true handle on our context.

Counsellors often use narrative therapy to transform negative thinking. A person presents with a negative story and is encouraged to reframe it from a more positive perspective *or* to imagine possible happy endings! I think this is powerful and Godly!

I was visiting a lovely 101 year old parishioner at Cashmere, Jean Walls. She told me a story of walking home from work one night as a young woman. She was making her way along Macmillan Avenue in pouring rain and got to the lowest point in the road where the water lay so deep across the road that she began to take her shoes and stockings off in order to wade through the deep water! Depressing story, eh! *But* the story does not end there! Just as she is getting prepared to take a step into the water she heard a whistle – it came from men on a rubbish truck coming along the road. "Hop on the back with us", they said, "we will take you through the water!" and she did. And all these years later the focus of the story is not walking in the pouring rain, nor the flooded impasse, but the miraculously timed rescue and the memory of swinging off the back of the truck with the rubbish collectors!