

Based on Exodus 16:2-15

Well the readings from Exodus 16: 2-15 typically involves human beings moaning about how God treats them – as compared with how they *think* they should be treated. It's a very similar picture to the 'Labourers in the vineyard' story in Matthew 20, which is also in the lectionary for today. But each of the stories present the human condition different ways. I spoke about the latter in our June podcast, so today I shall concentrate on the former.

In the Exodus reading we have the story of Yahweh's miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness. We are shown a God who is very concerned about the well-being of the people and whose compassion is shown by repeated interventions in the life of Israel.

This is the same God who promised to be with Moses and the people at the burning bush, who demonstrated God's awesome care at the Passover and at the crossing of the sea. Now God sends manna – Israel's 'daily bread', to save the people from starvation. But the food is also sent to demonstrate the mercy and presence of God.

The story starts with us being told about the moans and groans of the people – something which crops up quite a lot during the accounts of the wilderness wanderings. 16: 3 "If Yahweh intended to kill us, why not in Egypt where at least our bellies were full?"

And because of the moans, God acts – as if to highlight that their complaining is just an example of their stupidity. It puts in mind the protests of the disciples in Mark 6:35-37, just before the feeding of the 5,000. Enough food appears as a benevolent rebuke to the foolishness of the people.

And apparently, there are to be two types of divine food. Quails in the evening and manna in the morning.

The people don't understand what the manna *is* and so Moses is able to say to them "It is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat." It's not really surprising that quite a few students of theology over the years have related this incident to the Lord's Supper, because although there are some differences, there are also some parallels.

In both cases, the people are in need of God's grace. In both cases, the recipients of that grace don't immediately see the full significance of the food in front of them. In both cases, the food is there as a result of God's intervention in human life. And in both cases, the food is emblematic in that, while it feeds an immediate hunger, it also fills a deeper need which goes far beyond satisfying any current appetite.

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But the bread also has the ability to test the *faithfulness* of the people. It is to be given daily for six days, but there is to be no miracle on the Sabbath, so on day *before* the Sabbath they are to gather twice as much as normal and then *only* on the Sabbath morning, the bread will have kept fresh overnight. Some people disobey the instructions, only to end up going hungry. So not even God's miraculous gifts should ever be taken for granted. They are to be used in the manner and for the purpose intended by God.

It can be difficult to understand the lack of gratitude on the part of these people who have witnessed such powerful expressions of God's mercy and prefer grumbling to praise. It reminds me of the disciples once again, who often displayed an exasperating inability to understand and to be responsive to what Jesus was about. The obtuse attitudes of the disciples and of Moses followers remind us how inclusive and patient God's mercy is towards us, I think.

So, when we talk about using human gifts then we should remember that, as well as practical consumable gifts like food, scripture teaches us not to take them for granted; not to be greedy with them; to use them properly and as intended; and to have faith that God will provide what is needed in physical and spiritual sustenance.

I would also suggest that the theme of being grateful for what God has already bestowed upon us, is also something to bear in mind during the current stresses and strains of getting our Risk Assessments as good and effective as they need to be before we venture into more risky environments of contact. Like many others, I have witnessed first-hand how vulnerable our health conditions can make us – even amongst those who think themselves 'fighting fit'. Many people have now realised that whilst no prepared environment can be guaranteed as 100% safe, the careful attention to detail that is required, is a way of appreciating God's protection, whereas if we become irritated or reluctant about these processes, we are like the followers of Moses in that we are 'moaning and groaning' in our own special kind of wilderness, because we want things to work in 'our' time rather than being patient and letting things happen in God's time!

I have come to have huge affection for our church communities in the time that I have served here. Please keep safe and well and IN GOD'S TIME we shall return to more familiar forms of contact even if they are never quite the same as before. God bless you. Amen