

BIBLE READINGS: Numbers 21:4-9 Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21

SERMON

Grumblers

In country, town, or city,
Some people can be found
Who spend their lives a grumblin'
At everything around.
They grumble, grumble, grumble
No matter what we say.
For these are chronic grumblers;
They grumble night and day.
They grumble at the preacher;
They grumble at his prayer;
They grumble at the offering
They grumble everywhere.
They stay away from meetin'
Because it's hot or cold
Or when it looks like rainin';
A headache or a cold.
They grumble when it's rainin'
They grumble when it's dry;
And if a little chilly, they
Grumble and they sigh.
And when they go out shoppin'
And see the price is high,
They grumble, grumble, grumble,
They'll grumble 'til they die.

A man came to breakfast one morning and told his wife he wanted two eggs - one fried, one scrambled. With no comment, the long-suffering wife cooked each egg to his specifications and then quietly put the plate in front of him. "Oh no!" he groaned, pushing it away. "You've fried the wrong egg."

This passage has a number of curiosities.

It is odd to me that the God who spoke the 10 commandments, with the second about not making carved images, should, so soon afterwards, command Moses to make such a likeness.

Nehushtan - the serpent on the pole which Moses made has come down to us in the symbol of the medical profession. The bronze figure remained until the time of Hezekiah, perhaps a thousand years later. In 2 Kings 18.4 we read that Hezekiah destroyed it because people were worshipping it as an idol. A Jewish Encyclopaedia suggests that the picture of Seraphim came from Babylonian sources and that these were related to the picture they had of Nehushtan.

But what gets my full attention is that if God sent these poisonous serpents to the Israelites, why couldn't God just as easily take them away again, as the Israelites begged Moses to pray to God to do? And it seems that Moses had no difficulty asking God to do this - to take away these serpents God had sent in the first place.

So why didn't God do what the people asked, or even what Moses asked? It could be argued that God lead the Israelites into temptation of idol worship by getting Moses to make the bronze serpent in the first place!

For me the clue is that the people realised that they had sinned by complaining, they realised that the serpents were a result of their sin of complaining, yet they continue to complain about that which they bring on themselves. Even their perception of the problem doesn't stop them complaining, it makes them continue to complain!

So the real remedy was in their own hands - to stop complaining!

So the people are left with the results of their sin, the serpents, yet if they turned to God's symbol of wholeness the bites would not be fatal.

And for me this begins to answer the question why God was reluctant to do away with the serpents, for I suspect, though I could hardly prove it from the text, that these "serpents" were in fact the humans who spent their lives complaining - they bit others. Many will remember what Paul says in Galatians: "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." But are you familiar with the words that immediately follow them: "If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." (Galatians 5:14-15).

And this means that the words of Jesus about the Son of Man being lifted up - set on a Cross, in our gospel reading from John today have added significance, for the serpents probably took human rather than reptilian form.

And the people who complained in the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus were not those who didn't go to Church - the lepers and sinners who Jesus visited and with whom he sat down and ate. The people who complained were the religious authorities who were put out by the company Jesus' kept - these other people.

The references are: "The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (Luke 5:30)

"Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves." (John 6:41-43)

"And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." (John 7:12) The latter were the authorities who were concerned that the ordinary people not be "deceived".

So the symbol of the serpent on the pole and the Son of Man on the Cross is that ordinary people, even if bitten by those who complain at the wideness of God's mercy, will never find the bites they receive fatal.

No one else, and least of all God, can help someone who is determined to spend their life complaining. Everyone else whom such people injure will not find their wounds fatal. But it requires real effort for someone who has lived their lives complaining to actually stop and count their blessings.

And turning to the Cross, what does God do here but show us all the result of human greed, self-centredness and exclusivity - the victim, God's child, is crucified. It is the eternal symbol of humanity's inhumanity to one another, and the grace of God which has overcome all this and welcomes in everyone who wants to be with others.

If I was to ask you who we are how would you respond? I would hope that you might respond with "We are the body of Christ". And if I was then to ask: "How do we know?" I would hope you might respond with "His Spirit is with us"

Are we really the body of Christ? Or perhaps more realistically, "Are we the complete body of Christ?" I think that the answer here is an emphatic No! The body of Christ is a far more numerous body than our congregation. Good Grief! We would be bored for all eternity if it were just us! But perhaps not, perhaps we'll be like fish in tanks swimming in circles, blissfully unaware that we have swum the same path for our entire lives - blissfully unaware that we've had the same conversation with the same people again and again. Perhaps this is what eternal life is like? I certainly hope not!

The proof that we are the Body of Christ, the body of those who would, by any other standards, never consider themselves worthy of inclusion, is that we are open to everyone else - with the emphasis on everyone. And it is here we know the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God is not the Spirit which is so special that ordinary people cannot share. The Holy Spirit of God is that Spirit which reaches out to others and says that all people are special. This is precisely why it is possible for each and every person to be a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The 4th Sunday of Lent is often called Refreshment Sunday, as people break their Lenten fast. Actually, I've discovered, every Sunday in Lent is a feast day, it is the week days when we fast. If you would like to count up the days between Shrove Tuesday and Easter Day, omitting the Sundays you will find that there are 40. (Actually it is even less because the feast of the Annunciation usually falls in this period too.) And on Sundays in our more liturgically focused churches, clergy will wear purple robes - the colour of kings and victory – certainly not of penitence and fasting.

Lent is not a time for grumbling and complaining – of “woe is me”-ing! Rather it is the time to take stock of our lives. Today, we are being urged to stop our complaints and be more inclusive of others. For God loves us and others too. All of us are special in God's eyes - not special above others - but special along with everyone else.

Acknowledgement: Rev Chris Lockely