

Complaining

Exodus 16:2-15

The American comedian and actor Woody Allen tells the old joke and makes an observation: "...there are two elderly women at a ... mountain holiday resort, and one of them says, "Boy, the food at this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yes, I know; and such small portions." Woody Allen adds, 'Well, that's essentially how I feel about life - full of loneliness, and misery, and suffering, and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly.'

There's an art to making complaining funny. But it doesn't make it any easier to handle. What are the things that are guaranteed to see you off with a complaint?

Someone pushing in on a queue? Poor service in a shop or restaurant? Someone talking over you? Someone not listening? Someone taking you for granted? Split infinitives? General rudeness? There are some people never happy unless they can find something to complain about. It's not say that it is wrong to complain, but a life couched in negativity can become addictive. Nothing seems to be right. Everything seems to be wrong. You complain. Tiredness can do it. An over-developed sense of privilege can do it. Wanting to show off in front of others can do it. Even when a complaint is justified, it can pull you down into fault-finding in everything. That narrow-eyed, overly critical mind, often seeking to do the right thing, and sometimes chill the atmosphere around and make it awkward for everyone. Sound familiar? In these difficult days it has been for me, and I suspect for many others, all too easy to be full of complaint. "Man alone is born crying, lives complaining, and dies disappointed," says Samuel Johnson. If not entirely true, I suspect most of us partially recognise the reality.

Our Bible story this morning starts of with an account of the grumbling of the people of Israel. It is a recurring theme throughout their time of exodus as they fled Israel and travelled to the Promised Land. It is quite astonishing. They had been freed from generations of slavery in Egypt. Their deliverance from the army of Pharaoh through the Red Sea was miraculous. Journeying into the desert they had no water, came to place where only bitter water was to be found, they

complained, another miracle, and drinkable water materialised. A few days later, fearing they would go hungry in the wilderness, the Israelites complained again, apparently against their leaders Moses and his brother Aaron, but really, well, Who was it they were complaining about? God of course. Pillar of smoke and pillar of fire or not, this elusive God, this on-the-move God, what was He up to and how would this God feed them? So they murmured, they complained, and God heard it.

In the Bible it does us no harm to wonder about what God is like and what God thinks and feels. We can't know for sure, but we can imagine. I think that's one of the great gifts of the Bible, imagining what God is like, what God is about, what God is doing, what God is going to do. Never be afraid to apply your imagination to God. It doesn't control, shape or define God, but at least it shows you are taking God seriously. I imagine God here. "What are they moaning about now? They lived in pain and servitude and slavery; I freed them. They were chased by an army of enemies; I protected them. They were trapped by an impossible sea; I got them through it. They were getting thirsty; I brought them fresh water. They are not sure of how to get to the Promised Land; I'll go ahead of them and lead them day and night. What is it now? What more do I have to do to get these stiff-necked stubborn people to realise that I am with them and that I love them and that I will feed them? They're hungry? Don't they have the resources to do something for themselves? Maybe I will let them feel the pangs a bit longer..."

But God did feed them. In fact, God promised to feed them for the rest of the journey. Bread and meat. And just so they got the point about Who was providing the feast, as they looked to the wilderness, what, or Who did they see? "...behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in a cloud." I wonder if there still weren't some complaining, "Oh, just quail. Any chips with that, or a little salad..."

Did the children have good grounds to complain? No, they did not. Who were they really complaining about? Not Moses and Aaron. It was God. And what they were displaying by their complaining was a lack of trust that God would provide.

I wonder to what extent in our lives we complain a little too easily and a little too quickly, and not stop to think before we narrow our eyes and harden our hearts and open our mouths. Last week I met a number of people for whom life has dealt a number of hard, unmerited knocks. Loss of loved ones, loss of security, loss of independence, loss of a future. Every reason to complain, and moan, and grumble. But somehow, they plodded on. Through tears, or pain, or disappointment. Humbling. Inspiring. A corrective certainly to my life, and a reminder of how God provides, sometimes even when the recipient had no idea of God. When you are inclined to complain, are you ignoring, diminishing, or forgetting what God has been giving? We often fail to discern God's presence in the ordinary, which leads us to deny God's activity in the extraordinary.ⁱ Now, if that all seems a little too 'counsel of perfection' because you know, and I know, that life sometimes is tough and unfair and grim, are there times when it is right to complain, or protest? complaints? Well of course, the answer there is yes. The question is to work out what we hope or think our complaint or protest seeks to achieve. For ourselves, or for others. Sometimes we need to act up, to speak out, to stir and be awkward because things are just not right.

Jeff Bezos, the slightly controversial founder of the Amazon company, has said: "What we need to do is always lean into the future; when the world changes around you and when it changes against you - what used to be a tail wind is now a head wind - you have to lean into that and figure out what to do because complaining isn't a strategy." There is truth in this.

In the Bible, the prophets did not simply complain, they protested. Loudly. Against injustice and unfaithfulness. Against the brokenness of their time. Against their political and religious leaders. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King, and Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough did not complain. They protested. The people of Belarus are not complaining. They are protesting. The forgotten Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza are not complaining. They are protesting. Maybe, perhaps controversially, people should be protesting when our UK Government admits, in Parliament, to intend breaking international law around Brexit.

And all the other protests, not complaints, but protests, against poverty and injustice in our society; against cultures that still down-play the place of women; against stigmatising mental health;

against the abuse of children; against under-valuing the of the lowest paid in our economy who are the very backbone of its success; against the side-lining of faith because people with no imagination can't see how it helps and holds and shapes for the good. Yes, there are times to complain, and protest! But only when it is for something that matters; when it is followed up by action that changes something – the situation, us, the lives of others.

Otherwise, 'Grumbling is the end of love'.ⁱⁱ Well, in human relationships. But with God, as in this story, it is an occasion to reach out, yet again, to provide, and to show that, despite the incomprehension and the faithlessness, because God sees all of us, God 'gets' us, God loves us. Always.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Terrence E Fretheim, Interpretation, Exodus, p181

ⁱⁱ Marlene Dietrich