

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the moment, we're looking at the story of Moses, as it's told in the great Book of Exodus. Last week, we heard how Moses led the people in triumph out of Egypt, across the sea, to freedom. I said at the time that that was the high point of the Moses story, because here we are, just a couple of weeks later, and look how our reading begins.

"The whole congregation of Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness." This wasn't a one-off. As we go on, the people are wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years before they enter the promised land, and they're complaining and moaning the whole time in those 40 years. In fact, I counted, just in this one reading from the Book of Exodus today, seven references to complaining. In the Gospel reading, there's also a reference to grumbling. That means, because it says at the end of that reading, "The workers grumbled against the landowner." That means that there's eight references to grumbling and complaining in today's readings, which is a theme there I just can't ignore, so I'll speak about it.

Just let me say, before I do that, that what I want to do today is to bring this Old Testament reading from Exodus into conversation with the parable we read in the Gospel, because actually there's quite a few themes that run across both stories, and I think it might help to look at them both together. Let me begin with this theme of complaining. Complaining can take many forms and involve any number of subjects.

Take the weather. When I was in London, we could not see the sun for 10 days in a row in February. That's how gray it was. Now, I complain if I don't see the sun by 10 o'clock in the morning.

Our readings today have two classic forms of complaint, not about the weather, but two forms that you'll hear over and over again. In the Exodus story, we get the "it was much better in the old days" form of complaint. The people said, "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." This is just a couple of weeks after they've left slavery in Egypt, and already they're looking back through rose-tinted spectacles.

There were fleshpots in Egypt, no doubt, but the Israelite slaves weren't sitting next to them. Meat was scarce in Egypt, and it wasn't going to be shared with the slaves. We know this, because an inscription has been found on a pyramid that lists the precise quantities of onion, radish, and garlic that sustained the slaves whilst they quarried the stone, so the complaint of the Israelites, which took the form of the "it was much better in the old days" contained untruths.

In the Gospel reading, that parable there, we find another form of complaint. This complaint is another classic. It takes the form of "it's not fair." What the people were saying there was true. It didn't contain any falsehood. Their complaint was simply an observation that the situation to them, with their work and their pay and the landowner, wasn't fair.

This parable that Jesus tells depicts a familiar scene in the Middle East. A landowner is busy harvesting his grapes. He goes down to the market square, recruits some workers, and this was standard practice. Then, if they're not being harvested, he goes back to get some more. He agrees to pay a denarius to the first people he employs. We're told several times in that Gospel reading that that was the usual daily wage. That's what he agreed to pay to the first people he employed.

I understand what happens next, because I spent a very happy summer once, picking hops in the South of England. Hops are like grapes. When they're ready to pick, you have to get them straightaway. The owner sees that he's not picking the grapes quick enough, so he goes back to the marketplace to get more workers to harvest the grapes, and then he has to go back a couple of times in the day, to make sure he can harvest all his grapes.

Then, at the end of the day, the landowner gets the foreman to pay the wages, beginning with those who were taken on at the end of the day. They get a denarius, the usual daily wage. When it gets to

those taken at the start of the day, who spent the whole day working, they're expecting to get more, yet they, too, receive a denarius, the usual daily wage, so they start to complain. "How come we get paid the same as these Johnny-come-latelies? It's not fair!"

Now, at this point, I'm not going to go on and lecture against the evils of complaining, because I can't help noticing that God not only hears but responds to the complaints of the Israelites. God says to Moses, "I have heard their complaining, and in the evening you'll eat meat, and in the morning you'll have your fill of bread." The Bible's actually full of godly people, who complain.

One of my favorite Old Testament prophets is called Habakkuk, and his book begins with Habakkuk saying to God, "O, Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen," and then there's a whole chapter of that. He carries on until you get to chapter two, where you get this verse. Habakkuk's finally had his say, and he says, "I will keep watch and see what God will say to me concerning my complaint." Of course, the Psalms are full of moans and groans. "Why do the wicked prosper," is a constant refrain. What's that, other than a more poetic way of saying, "It's not fair"?

God understands our need to complain. Being a Christian does not require us to always put up and shut up. We don't have to wear a cheesy grin of resignation. We, like the people of Israel, Habakkuk, and the Psalmist, and saints throughout the ages, can bring our concerns and our complaints to God. We're invited to pour out our hearts to God. Also, at times, it's right, perhaps, to complain to other people, and there's some helpful lessons about this in the text.

For instance, let's be sure to direct our complaints to the right people. Moses was quick to point out that the complaints being directed against him should rightly be directed against God. When we see fit to complain, let's not be like the Israelites and embellish our complaints with untruths or bitterness. Let's remember to get the manner of what we say right, so that those hearing us are free to focus on the matter.

Let's try and share our concerns in an appropriate way and manner, because I've noticed in church life, it's usually, if not always, the manner in which something is said, which causes more offense than the matter. If a matter is raised in a calm manner, not embellished, not personalized, then it's much easier to respond to it, but enough of complaining. I should say that that's not brought out by anything that's happened in church life in recent months. That's purely coming out of the text, but it did give me opportunity to get in there first.

There's another great theme which runs across both the Old Testament and the Gospel reading today, and that theme is the generosity of God. In both stories, the punchline is that God provides generously for His people, maybe not in the way that they were hoping or expecting, but still God provides. In both stories, God provides to people, who might be said not to deserve His provision.

I've heard it said that if ever there was a generation that didn't deserve God's goodness and generosity, it was the generation that crossed the Red Sea with Moses. They moaned, as I said, for 40 years, no letup. Moses said, in a later chapter, "You've been rebellious against the Lord from the day I first knew you." Yet God provided for them. The bread was there for them six days a week, and the quails were there in the evening.

The key to understanding our Gospel reading is what's not said. The workers grumbled, because the ones who came late in the day got paid the same as the ones who'd worked all day. If it said, if there was a line that said something like, "Those who came late in the day worked really hard. They worked so hard that they almost did a day's work in two hours," if it said that, we might understand the story better, and the workers might have not complained so much, but it doesn't say that. There is no indication that they deserved to be paid as well as they were.

The reason that all the workers got the same pay was because the landowner was generous. His goodness and his generosity was not linked to the worthiness of the recipients. This, the parable tells us, is true of God, which is why, in the Christian

church, we talk so much about God's grace. Thank God, He treats us not as we deserve, but out of His goodness, His love, the grace that He shows towards us.

generous God, who spared nothing in His pursuit of us.

Amen.

That truth lies at the heart of this Eucharist, when we remember the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We remember that Saint Paul said that whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We don't have to reach a certain level of perfection or understanding before God comes to us in grace. He gets there first. "Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Coming out of this great truth of the goodness and the generosity of God, there's one more final point of comparison between these two readings that I'd like to make. They both speak of enough. In Exodus, God says to Moses, "I'm going to rain bread from heaven, and each day the people should go out and gather enough for that day," not hoard it, as some of them, we find out later on, did, because there was a bounty out there. Just go and gather enough for one day, because they were being tested that it would be there the next day. Could they trust God, that what God provided one day would be there for the next? They weren't to hoard. They were just to collect enough for one day.

In the Gospel, the reading makes it very clear that the workers who did a whole day's work were paid the usual daily wage. They agreed, at the beginning of the day, that that was enough. That was enough for them to do a day's work. They never complained that they weren't paid enough. They simply complained that they deserved more than the latecomers. That was the grounds of their complaint. They weren't satisfied with enough. They should have heeded the wise words of Oprah Winfrey. "Be thankful for what you have. If you concentrate on what you don't have or compare yourself to others, you will never, ever have enough."

What's enough? Well, that's for each of us to decide for ourselves. What we can all decide together is to commit ourselves afresh to the