

Exodus 16:2–15

Captain Cook and his expedition were the first Europeans to set foot in Australia. They made contact with the Aborigines and began to learn a few words of the Aboriginal language. When Cook asked what the funny jumping animals were, the Aborigines replied 'I don't know'. In their language that is pronounced 'kangaroo'. So to this day there are millions of 'I don't knows' hopping about Australia.

Another strange word like that comes from the story of the Israelite people when they were in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt. Food was short and the Israelites began to complain that they would die of hunger. Their leader, Moses, prayed to God, and in the morning the ground was covered all over with white flakes, like frost. The people were saying, 'what is it?' what is it?'

Finally someone dared taste it. It was s honey flavoured wafers. If you had been an Israelite child your parents would probably have given you a jar and told you to go and collect some of the ...err... some of that 'wotsit'. The Israelite word for wotsit' was manna. So the Israelites were saved from starvation by eating honey flavoured manna or wotsit and by eating quail in the evening.

Both these have their origin in natural phenomena that occurred in the wilderness. Quails arrived in northern Sinai in August September in great numbers from the Sudan and Ethiopia and, exhausted from their journey, could easily be hunted and gathered. Manna is thought to be a secretion from a flowering tree such as the tamarisk bush, assisted by the sting and secretion of a tree louse. This 'natural food', well known to anyone used to living in the wilderness and these TV survival programmes – 'RBear Grylls and Ray Mears in the Wilderness' - became the basis of accounts of miraculous feeding of the Israelites

You might still hear the word manna today. Many talk about 'manna from heaven' when something happens in their life that brings a help or salvation. I used to live in Nottingham and outside the city there is a farm called Manna Farm. It's a place where drug addicts can go and learn how to live without drugs. Manna farm was set up by Christians, some of whom had problems with drugs themselves in the past. They called it Manna farm because, just as the Israelites believed God sent the manna to rescue them when they were in a desperate situation, the farm helps rescue people today who are desperate. What is our manna? What rescues us, sustains us in times of hardship?

The Israelites were in the wilderness. They had been wandering for nearly forty days. They were starving. This was an environment of acute risk and deep jeopardy. They were crying out for help and God answered by giving them manna from heaven – what's this they said?

In our reading from Exodus the Israelites were getting hungry and fed up and started to complain. The whole lot of them are complaining. Verse 2 'the Israelites all complained to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. They said 'If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots and had plenty of bread! But you have brought us out into this wilderness to let this whole assembly starve to death'

As people do when they are angry and fed up and displaced they start to twist others motives for doing what they did. As if Moses deliberately brought the Israelites out of slavery to starve them to death in the wilderness. Honestly - people – sometimes there is no pleasing them. We're going to die they thought. – do we die in the fleshpots of Egypt, as slaves being brutalised and oppressed? Or would we prefer to die in the wilderness – free yet starving? They are all saying they'd rather go back to what they knew.

Jewish rabbis have a saying that while the people got out of Egypt in a day, it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the people. At its core, the "slavery complex" is to internalize powerlessness and a victim mentality. Even though Moses had led people out of slavery, they still complained," why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us?

When is the last time you had a good moan? We can all think of times when we've complained, whether over small annoyances, or serious faults. We might complain about things we find unfair in our family, about our consumer rights, or the world in general. In some situations, our right to complain is protected by law; for example, in England and Wales, children have a right to an advocate when they complain about children's services. This can provide important protection for vulnerable people.

Perhaps you think the Israelites were ungrateful; or perhaps that they had plenty to complain about, wandering in the wilderness with not enough to eat or drink. Do you complain more when you're hungry? It sounds like the Israelites were 'hangry' – a term coined by combining the words 'hungry' and 'angry'. Yet God provided food enough for their needs, which suggests their complaint wasn't dismissed but heard. That's such an important part of making a complaint – that we are listened to and heard, and something changes.

Did you notice that God sent them quail and manna – bread of heaven – enough for their needs, but hardly a feast. Are we content with enough, or are we always looking for more?

Research suggests that our brains are hard-wired to complain. In harsh environments, it's a key survival skill to be able to identify what is wrong in a situation, the risks that might put us into danger, and try to fix it. When we're no longer in life-or-death situations, though, this instinct might lead to dissatisfaction or greed.

At this time when people celebrate harvest, if we have enough to eat, are we satisfied with that, or do we always expect bigger, better, more? Perhaps we make ourselves unhappy by never being content that we have enough, failing to believe that life is good enough.

Some years ago, Will Bowen started the complaint-free challenge (Will Bowen, *A Complaint Free World: How to Stop Complaining and Start Living the Life you Always Wanted* (Harmony, 2004; [Paperback](#); [ebook](#)).

The idea was to wear a bracelet on your wrist, and swap arms each time you found yourself complaining. The challenge was to try to go for 21 days without complaining! Will said, 'Complaining is focusing on what we don't want. It's talking about what's wrong, and what we focus our attention on expands'. To be happier, we need to focus more on positive, happy things. Will was not saying that we shouldn't complain about serious injustice or traumatic events. Rather, he suggested that change happens not through complaining but by taking action to make things better. But often our complaints are about more trivial things – a chore we don't like or running out of our favourite chocolate. Can we refocus that negativity into gratitude?

St Ignatius developed a practice called the Examen, in which you reflect at the end of each day on the day's highs and lows, including what you are grateful for.

At that moment, the Hebrew people were ready to settle for slavery rather than struggle for justice and liberation.

Rather than embrace the struggle for justice and liberation in our day and time, too many settle for the way things are. We settle for the way things are in healthcare, education, poverty, crime, in economics and so forth. We settle because the powers that be in government, business, and the bureaucracy seem too large or too strong to overcome. We settle because the media makes some of the issues seem overwhelmingly complex. We settle because the struggle is just too difficult and if we are comfortable enough why bother?

This story about the Israelites in crisis contained object lessons that would be principles for the new free and liberated community of the Israelites.

There is the principle of the Sabbath – having rest from your labours – not overworking yourselves or your employees. The Israelites are instructed to gather twice as much manna on the sixth day as they normally gather, the implication being that they will then not need to gather any manna on the seventh (Sabbath) day.

Then there is the principle of looking after the poor and concern for equality. In verses 17-18. However much people gathered it amounted to the same. Those who had gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage. This is not a charter for laziness, but a way of saying that God met each person's needs completely, and independently of the human competitiveness that would undoubtedly result in some getting more, at the expense of those who gathered less.

In a couple of week's time we will look at Moses announcing God's will in the Ten Commandments. The amplification of that takes up a lot of the books of Exodus, and Leviticus. God's will for money and property is one of the most distinctive marks of biblical ethics in these passages. It is called the Jubilee. Every fifty years people must give back to the people the land and property that is inalienably theirs that they have lost in the rough and tumble of the economy. Jubilee was a celebration of bringing things back to where they ought to be. You can read about it in Leviticus 25. Like the great gavel that ends the fury of Wall Street every day, the yabal trumpet would sound in the fiftieth year and an act of communal sanity would restore everyone to proper place in the economy because life in the new community of faith does not consist in getting more but in sharing well.

The Israelites had come out of slavery. They didn't want to construct a society where they would enslave others or put others in a position in which they could enslave. They were heading for a Promised Land – occupied at the moment by the Canaanites. It is likely that the word Canaanites meant 'traders' ones who bought and sold and moved money and goods. When Moses wanted to state the distinctive mark of Israel alongside the Canaanites, he knew the distinctive mark would be ethical. Moses observed the working of the market, the practice of accumulation and acquisitiveness and greed and monopoly. He observed, as anyone can see, that in the long run the operations of accumulation and acquisitiveness tend to monopoly, so that some end up with a lot

and some end up with little or with none, have and have nots, wealth and poverty. And what Moses figured out is that such a process is an impossible way to run a community. And so he announces in Leviticus 25 that in the fiftieth year the property will be returned to its proper owners. Because ultimately the land belongs to God and not to the accumulators. God wants the little ones, who always lose in the market game, to have their stuff. When the signal is given, the vicious cycle of accumulation is broken; wealth is divested back to the ones who do not have it. It is an act of divestment.

It will not surprise you that there is no evidence to suggest that the principle of Jubilee was ever enacted in the early Israelite community. When Jesus came proclaiming the year of the lord's favour, the year of Jubilee, in Luke 4, they tried to kill him. Eventually they did.

What Moses understood, what we all understand, is that you can't have a viable, peaceable, safe, urban, rural and world community when deep poverty must live alongside huge wealth, when high privilege is visible alongside endless disadvantage. You can have some inequities, but the inequities must be curbed by a practice of neighbourliness that knows every day that rich and poor, haves and have nots, are in it together and must find ways of being together as neighbours in common. We carry each others bad debts. We bail each other out.

God bailed out the Israelites, starving in the wilderness, crying for help. They were provided with manna from heaven. But those who were too greedy didn't get too much. Those who went without, found they still have enough for their needs. Throughout scripture God wills and acts towards a neighbourliness that curbs greed, vetoes fear and removes the causes of violence.

As we approach our Harvest. Pray that justice will be done and all will share in the Harvest.

Give thanks for manna from heaven..

What is the manna, the 'bread of heaven' God provides for us, that we are grateful for? Let's see how gratitude helps us.