

Today's Reflection Service is by Alastair France

Let us come together willingly with God, here in time and space with us. Amen.

An extract from the Book of Exodus (chapter 16 verses 2-15)

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

The Israelites said to them, "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; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?"

And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him-- what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."



The Gathering of Manna
Musée de la Chartreuse, 1470

An extract from the Gospel according to Matthew (chapter 20 verses 1-16)

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'

They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Reflection:

I very recently gave away all my old university text books to be exported hopefully to be used for some education at least. I was concerned that, as a chemist by training, they would be very out of date, but I guess the fundamentals of chemistry haven't changed that much in the nearly 40 years since I started my degree (that's scary). Sadly I never really used my skills in chemistry, but I stayed interested in it. Recently I've become a little more interested in Economics, having been taught some very non-conformist economics by a friend of mine (who was also a scientist by original training). I guess we all use economics from time to time, and in many ways the lectionary readings today are all about economics, about supply and demand.

The scene in Matthew has a horrible ring about today's "gig economy" and zero hours contracts.

People are waiting for work, waiting to be hired, waiting to earn a day's wage - which in those days was just enough to feed your family. The issue then is one of daily bread. Just like manna in the Exodus narrative. Just as in the prayer Jesus gives us when we ask him how we should pray.

To be hired late in the day and get less than a day's wages means belt-tightening for the entire family. Not to mention what it does to your sense of self-worth to be overlooked or passed by when the hiring is being done. To not be chosen to work creates anxiety today, just as it did two thousand odd years ago.

The lesson here is one of extraordinary generosity. Everyone got a day's wage. Everyone could go home and feed his or her family. Just as it was with manna, everyone got enough, no one got too much, nothing was left over. "Give us this day our daily bread."

We say this **every time** we say the Lord's Prayer.

Does it ever occur to us just what it is we are praying and saying? Most of us are fortunate – we don't live just one day to the next. But many people do, and they come to church doors every day hoping that we have listened to Jesus tell this story and that we believe it.

It feels as though Jesus is somehow trying to engineer a return to the wilderness - a return to manna - a return to utter and radical dependence on God and God's daily provisions. God makes it clear to Moses (actually a little later in the story than our reading – but bear with me on that) that you cannot gather the stuff up and save it for a rainy day. It goes sour on you. It spoils. It starts crawling with worms and moths. Take it one day at a time and all will be well.

So with Jesus, everyone is given a day's provision, those who worked all day and those who worked just a few hours. Like any household with children, the cries of those hired early in the day are oh-so-familiar.

"It isn't fair!"

"We were there first!"

"We deserve more because we did more!"

And we might glibly reply, "Life isn't fair"

Or is it? What Jesus seems to be getting at is that what is fair and what is just is established by God, not by our standards of merit, qualifications, and grounds for staking a claim. What is being discussed, as usual, is God's kingdom - life lived under the reign of God, a God who is generous to a fault, but a God whose generosity offends us and baffles us.

The Reverend Professor Marguerite Shuster observes in a comment to the lectionary:

"Grace is not grace if it is qualified by superior virtue in the recipient. Sinners are not sinners if some are less dependent on grace than others. Besides, if one has enough oneself why would one even want more than someone else, unless out of some sense of pride and self-righteousness?"

"It seems odd to put the question that way so normal, so natural, is our desire to want more – this shows the depth of our sin. The more we insist on our tit-for-tat way of thinking, the more baffled and angry we will be at God's whole way of dealing with us"

Again, consider what it feels like to be hired late in the day with the anxiety of going home empty handed intensifying as each hour passes by. Is even working through the heat of the day any worse than having one's hope of a meal for the family fade away as the sun begins to set in the western sky?

Even apart from the need for daily bread, work is an integral part of creation, and those denied the opportunity, whether for disability, age, or any other cause, must feel a deeper sense of despair and a keen lack of purpose and meaning in life. Work can be stressful, monotonous, and difficult, but to be out of work can be even worse.

In this time when people have been furloughed – even though the needs for their daily bread have been met – many have felt they have lost their sense of purpose.

I only learned a few years back of something that my own father did when he had lost his job. He took the perspective – much as my wife Rebecca did recently and as many people do that lose their jobs – that finding that next role is itself a full-time job. He left the house every morning, briefcase in hand, freshly ironed shirt, suit and tie. He had not told his children. Yet some people are so embarrassed about their loss of status that they don't tell any of their family. They just follow their old routine hoping against hope, holding on until the money (and any credit lines) run out. Those of us who have maintained employment are tempted to say, "There but for the grace of God go I".

The temptation is always to assume God serves our sense of what is fair, our sense of "justice". The temptation is always to believe that somehow those who come to the vineyard first and early are more deserving and have stake to a higher claim on God's generosity, love, and forgiveness. The temptation is to believe that we can really earn the right to more than bread that is given daily.

But an even worse temptation is to think that it is always too late to accept the Master's invitation to work in God's vineyard.

The good news is that God's grace is so great and so surprising that it can provide enough no matter how late in the day it is. Whether on the deathbed, in the jail cell or after repeated failures. This is because the recipient need not add anything to the grace, but simply receive it in order for it to do its life-sustaining work. Even as the sun sets on this life, it is not too late to accept God's Amazing Grace.

And it is never too soon for the rest of us to begin to consider that heaven's enough, heaven's daily bread, and heaven's daily wages make all earthly comparisons look meaningless and silly.

Jesus's assurance that the last shall be first and the first shall be last is tied to manna season, and settling for bread and wages that are given daily. We are called to be those people who pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" and really make an effort to live that out. To live life in God's kingdom is a journey to return to manna season.

I struggle with this – it goes against so many of our modern day learnings. Yet Mahatma Ghandi's famous quote reminds us...

"The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed."

Manna season: when everyone has enough, no one has too much. If you store it up, it sours on you.

Maybe our final goal here is to be as generous to others as God is with us. After all, there must be some reason that God has created us in God's own image. And as John 3:16 states,

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

God loves and God gives. We are created in God's image. We are created to love and to give. And to be as surprisingly generous with others as God is with us.

Worship Music

God So Loved the World <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLvthjDEUnQ> (includes music so those that want to sing can do so)

I am the Bread <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXYEaNh72JQ> (it's a communion hymn really but is rather appropriate)

Guide me o thy Great Redeemer (I love listening to a Welsh Male Voice Choir, and as this includes "Bread of Heaven" I'm sure you will want to join in too)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3NmfmVGblw>

Prayers:

We pray for God's grace.

Lord, receive our praise
and hear our prayer.

Lord God, through your grace we are your people:
through your Son you have redeemed us;
in your Spirit you have made us your own.

We pray for the Church, for Justin our Archbishop, for Bishops Stephen and Dagmar, for Nikki our Rector and for all who are called to minister to your people. We pray for our congregations, whether in a Church building or online that they may be fulfilled by your grace.

Make our hearts respond to your love.

Lord, receive our praise
and hear our prayer.

We pray for the world, for our government and the governors of all people that they may, guided by your infinite wisdom, govern us all with care and help us navigate these troubled times. We pray especially for those people who live where there is no functional government or under corrupt regimes and we think of those whose lives are blighted by war or disaster – for those under conflict in Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria and those still affected by the explosion in Beirut.

Make our lives bear witness to your glory in the world.

Lord, receive our praise
and hear our prayer.

We pray for the sick, and those in need and for the healthcare workers that strive tirelessly to help them. We think particularly of those known to us who are sick at this time.

Make our wills eager to obey, and our hands ready to heal.

Lord, receive our praise
and hear our prayer.

We give you thanks to you for your grace and for feeding us, as you fed the Israelites, with your manna from heaven. May it always be sweet and fresh in our mouths, hearts and minds. We thank you for your Holy Word as we have heard and read it today.

Make our voices one with all your people in heaven and on earth.

Joining all our prayers together we say the prayer our saviour taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven;
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.**

Ending

Let us go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ, Amen