

SERMON: 2017/09/24 - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front.]

Are we there yet?!  
I'm *bored*.  
I'm hungry.  
How much farther is it?  
My legs hurt.  
Can you carry me?  
I'm tired.  
Do we *have* to go?

I'm sure that you lot have never said any of those things, but the Hebrews - Jacob's family: the people we call "the Jews" - were *terrible* complainers: whinge, whinge, whinge.

Do you remember how God had helped them to escape Egypt by lots of miracles? First there had been ten plagues. *Then*, He parted the sea-waters so that they could run to safety without getting wet.

But now they were in the desert, and it was very hot and dry and there were scorpions and snakes and [with an exaggerated slouch] "Urgh! Kill me now," they moaned.

And this disappointed God: there was (still) so much to celebrate - they were free from being bullied by the nasty Egyptians, and they were on their way to a new land 'flowing with milk and honey' [Ex. 3:8,17;13:5;33:3] - "Yum!" Like a bowl of Cheerios.

But He didn't respond to their impatience by becoming angry like I would have done. (Or maybe like your mums and dads.) Instead, He did something (else) amazing:

One evening, when the Hebrews were again making a fuss and criticising God to Moses, their leader, a 'pillar of fire' suddenly appeared next to them: "Whoosh!" [Ex. 13:21,22;14:24] It was really scary! And from it they heard a loud, strong voice saying: "I have heard you grumbling against me, so *watch out(!)*, for this sign: '...in the morning [when you wake up] you will be filled with [food]. Then you will know that *I* am the Lord' [Ex. 16:12].

And that's what happened! When they got out of bed the next day, a soft, white sweet substance rained down from the sky [Ex. 16:31; Numb. 11:7,9]. [Throw marshmallows into the congregation.]

Oooh! It was delicious.

And it kept happening - for forty years! [Ex. 16:35]  
[Throw more marshmallows into the congregation.]

And with mouths full of lovely stickiness, the Hebrews said to each other: "What is it!?" which, in their language, was "Ma-na?" And that became the white stuff's name: "Ma-na."

Wow! Let's pray: Our Father in Heaven, we're amazed by how you cared for the Jews in the Bible. Thank you that, in Jesus' name, you "shower" us with blessings too. Amen.

[Ask children to depart]

I don't know if you've noticed that the first few chapters of *Exodus* can be read as a (dramatic) conflict - a *battle* - between Heaven and Hell: one commentator describes the various miracles God performs against the Egyptians as 'weapons of war' [n.1], and the text *itself* describes Him as being 'a warrior' [Ex. 15:3], who "*hurls*" their chariots back into the waves, and *shatters* Pharaoh's forces with gigantic "fists" [Ex. 15:6,12].

And it isn't just His actions, which were combative.

Remember God's rhetoric too - His oratory, to and through Moses, in those early scenes: He doesn't plead or negotiate with the Hebrews' captors; His language was powerful, *blunt* and menacing, virile, full of bravado and alpha-male manliness.

For me, a comic-book fan, the portrayal *there* conjures up a picture in my imagination of God as a 'Mighty Thor'-like character (from the Marvel universe), with bulging steroid-ized muscles, and flowing blond hair, massive puffed-up chest [\*].

But if the annihilation of Egypt's monarchy *and* military are important for offering us opportunity to see a side of God that we mustn't neglect: His *fearsomeness* - His bellicosity (towards immorality and injustice), which are *somewhat* "softened" by our usual focus, as *Christians*, on Jesus - though these aspects are in fact visible in the New Testament, such as in the dramatic Temple-clearing incident [Jn. 2:13-20]; today's episode *here*, with the "ma-na" exposes God's appeasing, tenderly *motherliness*.

He doesn't rant and lose His temper with the people - even when they accuse Him, *outrageously*, of scheming to murder them. Look at chapter 16, verse 3: "...you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to

death.” - what a *ridiculous*, childish, *blasphemous* thing to say! Completely over-the-top and unwarranted.

*Instead*, He *rushes* to meet their need. Like (my) Rebekah, who, when Poppy was a baby, would carry with us, wherever we went, a huge bag of (organic) biscuits, dried fruit and other healthy snack-food, nappies and milk and an assortment of creams and lotions, God won't let His people suffer for even a moment: He *smothers* them - from the sky - with a *gratuitous* provision of comforting sweetness.

But even as He “rains” that blessing upon them, showering them with this abundance, notice that each person is commanded to take only 'enough' to meet their requirement for *that* day. This is very revealing - *and challenging*, for it suggests that in God's scheme of "the good life" - at its heart - is 'restraint' [n.2], whilst we are a nation of gluttons - 'a society that rejoices in over-consumption' [n.3] - and Christians, in particular - according to surveys of American waistlines - are among the worst offenders. And their "pastors" tend to be the fattest of all! [n.4] [Pause.]

Furthermore, *despite* our rampant indulgence, we also manage to throw away 'close to half of all [the] produce grown'(!) - millions of tonnes of food thrown into landfill and incinerators, enough, apparently, I read, each year, to bury *half* of London beneath waste [n.5]. Can you imagine such a thing?

But, to be clear, my point isn't that we should abstain from delicious meals and emaciate ourselves: Jesus was a notorious partygoer [see: Mt. 11:19] and He's our model of holiness; but we *must* re-examine our lifestyles (and diet) if only because of the fact that so many - including in this town - don't get enough food.

*Additionally*, however, we should do so - abstain from excess, that is - because our priorities just happen to lie elsewhere, with piling up rewards in The Kingdom [Mt. 19:28-39; Jn. 4:36; Lk. 12:33] rather than with piling on pounds. After all, it is a simple equation really: the more I give to myself, the less I have to help those around me. Amen?

#### Footnotes:

1. Dozeman, Thomas B. (2009), *Exodus (Eerdmans Critical Commentary)*, Cambridge; Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 139. See also: Miller, Jr., Patrick D. (1973), *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 113f.

2. Davis, Ellen F. (2009), *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, New York, N. Y.: Cambridge University Press, 75.
3. Andrews, Ryan (21st July 2010), 'Is Gluttony Destroying the World?', *Relevant Magazine*, available at <https://relevantmagazine.com/life/whole-life/features/22316-is-gluttony-destroying-the-world> (accessed September 23, 2017).
4. See: Anonymous (4th January 2013), 'Fat in Church', *FoxNews*, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/06/03/obesity-epidemic-in-america-churches.html> (accessed September 23, 2017).
5. Goldenberg, Suzanne (13th July 2016), 'Half of all US Food Produce is Thrown Away, New Research Suggests', *The Guardian*, available at [https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/13/us-food-waste-ugly-fruit-vegetables-perfect?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/13/us-food-waste-ugly-fruit-vegetables-perfect?CMP=share_btn_tw) (accessed September 23, 2017).

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