

Sermon and Readings for 17th Sunday After Pentecost 20 September 2026

Exodus 16.2–15

² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ 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.’ ⁴ 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. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.’ ⁶ 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, ⁷ 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?’ ⁸ 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.’ ⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.”’ ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹² ‘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.”’ ¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

Psalms 105.1–6; 105.37–45

¹ O give thanks to the Lord and call upon his name:
tell among the peoples what things he has done.

² Sing to him, O sing praises:
and be telling of all his marvellous works.
³ Exult in his holy name:
and let those that seek the Lord be joyful in heart.
⁴ Seek the Lord and his strength:
O seek his face continually.
⁵ Call to mind what wonders he has done:
his marvellous acts, and the judgements of his mouth,
⁶ O seed of Abraham his servant:
O children of Jacob his chosen one.
³⁷ He brought Israel out with silver and with gold:
and not one among their tribes was seen to stumble.
³⁸ Egypt was glad at their going:
for dread of Israel had fallen upon them.
³⁹ He spread out a cloud for a covering:
and fire to lighten the night.
⁴⁰ The people asked, and he brought them quails:
and satisfied them with the bread from heaven.
⁴¹ He opened a rock, so that the waters gushed:
and ran in the parched land like a river.
⁴² For he had remembered his holy word:
that he gave to Abraham his servant.
⁴³ So he led out his people with rejoicing:
his chosen ones with shouts of joy;
⁴⁴ He gave them the land of the nations:
and they took possession of the fruit for which other peoples had toiled,
⁴⁵ So that they might keep his statutes:
and faithfully obey his laws. O praise the Lord.

Philippians 1

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am

confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. ¹² I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. ¹⁵ Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶ These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel; ¹⁷ the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. ²⁰ It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. ²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's

doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20.1–16

¹ ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴ and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So, they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ 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?” ⁷ They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² 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.” ¹³ 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? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Sermon prepared by Reverend Canon Pauline Harley

Let’s begin this week with **grumbling**. Take your pick—there’s plenty of it around. I suppose we could begin by surveying all the grumbles in the congregation. Everything people have complained about over the past few weeks—church, family, work, the weather, other people. We could just lay them all out here this morning and see what we come up with!

After all, grumbling is a very human thing.

We grumble. We compare. We look back and convince ourselves that things used to be better than they really were. We remember the good bits and conveniently forget the difficult ones. Everybody does it. Right?

Well... perhaps publicly listing everyone's complaints isn't the best way to begin. Nobody particularly enjoys having their grumbles handed back to them on a Sunday morning! So perhaps we'd better begin with Scripture. And today we have plenty to choose from.

We have a Gospel parable filled with grumbling, comparison and misunderstanding. And in Exodus, we meet God's people doing some very real grumbling about some very real concerns—with perhaps just a little exaggerated remembering of how wonderful life supposedly was back in Egypt.

Different people. Different circumstances. The same very human tendency. When life becomes difficult, when someone else seems to have received more than we have, or when God doesn't appear to be doing things the way we think God should, **we grumble**. And underneath that grumbling lies an important question: **Can we trust the goodness and generosity of God when life is not going the way we expected?**

The Exodus story is full of complaints. But if we're honest, we can understand why. We have centuries of hindsight. We know the Israelites were going to be cared for. We know God had not abandoned them. We can see where their trust became shaky and where fear took over. But they couldn't see any of that. They were about six weeks into their wilderness journey. Six weeks might not sound like much when we know they had nearly forty years ahead of them, but it was certainly long enough for the food they had carried out of Egypt to begin running out. And suddenly this great adventure of freedom didn't feel quite so wonderful.

They were hungry. They were frightened. And they began wondering whether leaving Egypt had been a terrible mistake. Their complaint was perhaps a little over the top: "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." Funny how memory works.

When the present becomes difficult, the past can suddenly look much better than it really was. They conveniently forgot one rather important detail: **They had been slaves in Egypt.** But now, hungry in the wilderness, Egypt was beginning to look pretty good. And God responds—not by abandoning them, not by punishing them for their grumbling, but by providing for them.

God says, in effect, “I will give you bread from heaven.” Bread from heaven? It sounds extraordinary. People have tried to explain manna scientifically, but perhaps that misses the point. The story is not primarily concerned with explaining *how* it happened. It is telling us something about **God**.

God provides. God remains faithful. God sustains people even when their faith is shaky and their complaints are loud. And the Israelites themselves didn’t understand what God had given them. When they saw this strange substance on the ground, they asked one another: **“What is it?”** And that question gives manna its name. “What is it?” I wonder whether that question might be expanded: **What is it that God is doing?** Perhaps that is one of the questions faith teaches us to ask.

When life becomes uncertain...

When the journey becomes difficult...

When what we expected doesn’t happen...

When we are tempted to look backwards and imagine that yesterday was so much better than today...**What is God doing here?**

Because sometimes God’s provision doesn’t arrive in the form we expected. Sometimes grace appears and we don’t recognise it. Sometimes God places something before us and our first response is simply: “What is it?” And perhaps that same question sits behind Jesus’ parable in Matthew. **What is God doing?**

Because the landowner in Jesus’ story behaves in a way that seems completely unfair. Some workers labour all day in the heat. Others work only part of the day. Some arrive almost at closing time. And at the end of the day, they all receive the same wage. No wonder the workers who had been there all day grumbled.

We might grumble too. “I’ve worked longer.” “I’ve done more.” “I’ve been here for years.” “I’ve served on committees.” “I’ve given my time.”

“I’ve endured all those sermons!” Surely, I deserve more.

And suddenly Jesus exposes something uncomfortable within us.

We are quite happy with grace when **we** receive it. But grace becomes much harder when somebody else receives more than we think they deserve. We start comparing. And comparison so easily turns generosity into unfairness. This parable certainly speaks to the life of the Church. Someone who comes to Christ late in life receives the fullness of God's grace just as surely as someone who has followed Christ for decades.

There are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. There is no lesser portion of grace for those who arrived late. God does not measure our worth by how many years we have occupied a pew, how many committees we have served on, or how much work we believe we have done. But perhaps Jesus is asking us to think even more deeply. What if grace and generosity shaped not only our understanding of heaven, but also the way we live **here and now**?

What if we looked at people not according to what they could produce, achieve or earn, but according to their God-given dignity? What if generosity mattered more than comparison? What if our first question stopped being, "What do I deserve?" and became, "How can I be generous?" That would turn quite a few of our assumptions upside down. And that is exactly what Jesus keeps doing. The kingdom of God operates according to a different measure. Not envy. Not competition. Not keeping score. But **grace**.

The Israelites looked at the manna and asked: "**What is it?**"

Perhaps we should keep asking the same question: **What is God doing here?**

What is God doing in this changing world? What is God doing in our church?

What is God doing through the person who has only just arrived?

What is God doing when things don't happen the way we expected?

And perhaps, if we stop grumbling long enough to look, we might discover that God is still providing. Still calling. Still welcoming. Still giving. Still pouring out grace in places we did not expect. The challenge is to stop comparing long enough to recognise it. Because following Jesus for the long haul means learning that much of what the world teaches us about deserving, earning and measuring simply does not fit the kingdom of God. Jesus turns our calculations upside down. And replaces them with grace.

What a challenging—and glorious—way to live. For the long haul. Amen.