

Dear Friends,

*Above all else I urge that there should be no murmuring in the community.*

These words are from the Rule of St. Benedict, his handbook for regulating the life of a religious community, monks or nuns living together in pursuit of their service of God. I become more and more convinced that the life of a monk is not so much a specialised role, but just one example of the way of life to which all people are called. We are all made to be God's people, to centre our lives on him, and we can best do so in harmonious co-operation with others, in community, in society, in the whole nation.

This is why Benedict is concerned with anything that might disrupt the harmony of the community, and constant grumbling or murmuring can so easily do that. He uses the Latin word *mussitare*, which even sounds like that undercurrent of murmuring complaint. It is of course not only monks, but most of us who love to grumble about our lot. The first reading of this Sunday's Mass begins: 'the whole community of the children of Israel began to complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.'

God's essential characteristic is his *hesed*, a Hebrew word for constant, steadfast love. Because he is God he will always love his people, he can do no other, and he shows this by how he deals with his chosen people: he leads them out of slavery in Egypt and guides them through the desert to the promised land, feeding them, sustaining them on the way. Immediately after the Exodus at the holy mountain Sinai he gives them, through Moses, his Law, the possession of which is the sign that they are the chosen people. But what is the first thing they do on receiving the Law? The commandments say they shall have no other gods but God and should not make a graven image or idol to bow down before and worship, but the people make a golden calf and worship that instead of the one true God. How very human, we might think!

And so, as the journey goes on, despite everything God does for them, they continue to complain. They even wish they were back in Egypt, where they had lots of meat to eat and bread to their heart's content. Whenever the present situation is hard going, it is tempting to look back and remember how wonderful things used to be in the past – even though they almost certainly were not that great! Our memories tend to be selective: we remember and romanticise the good things, but forget the bad.

God, however, goes on feeding and guiding his people despite all their complaints and grumbles. When they are running out of food in the desert, he sends quails

and manna for them to eat. There is just one proviso. The manna needs to be gathered and eaten each day, it will not keep, so they can never be quite sure that it will be provided again the next day. But it is! God is faithful to his promises, and if only they can forget or lay aside their feelings of resentment and disappointment, they will know the faithfulness of God, his constant unwavering love for them.

This is surely just much the case with us today. We too may have complaints about our lot - and sometimes we may think they are justified, but we need to lay aside our doubts and fears and simply give ourselves in faith and trust to God, and then we will know his love for us.

I would like to add a word about the *Lectionary*, the pattern of readings from Scripture that we follow week by week at Mass. On Sundays we have a three-year cycle of readings, and currently we are in Year B or 2, the year of Mark. Why then, you might ask, do we have at present readings from St. John's Gospel? The three years are based on the so-called Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. If you make a synopsis of their contents and place them side by side, you can see how these three Gospels are related to each other. On Sundays of Ordinary Time (outside the special seasons of Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter) the readings follow the Synoptic Gospels more or less in sequence, but since Mark's Gospel is comparatively short it is supplemented by the long chapter 6 of St. John, Christ's teaching on the bread of life, inserted appropriately after Mark's recounting of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. This is where we are currently in Year 2.

St. John's Gospel cannot be related to the Synoptics so easily, but is used extensively at other times, especially during the season of Lent and Easter, when it comes into its own. The first reading at Mass on Sundays is chosen from the Old Testament in order to contrast with or parallel the Gospel passage, while the second reading follows an independent course from the letters of St. Paul: this is not connected with the other two readings. I was once helping in a parish where, because of this feature, the priest habitually left out the second reading, though I did not know this until I arrived. Sometimes I wanted to refer to the second reading in my homily and found myself having to say, 'If we had had the second reading we would have heard St. Paul say ... ' With God, in the end everything does relate to everything else!

This may all sound rather complicated, but I think it shows the considerable degree of care that has gone into selecting the readings of Scripture that we hear in our worship. I know that if we relied on our own choices, I would choose my own favourite passages time after time! The 2nd Vatican Council wanted the people of the Church to have available to them a wider and more representative

pattern of readings than used to be the case. God does after all feed us with his Word just as much as he does with the sacrament of the Eucharist, the bread of life. This is why it is always good, if you can, to spend time pondering the readings from Scripture, receive them as God's gift and reflect on what he is saying to us through them.

Wishing you every blessing and much feeding, Fr. Robin.