

Address by Nigel Guthrie for 2 October 2022 at St Michael's Church

There really is a great deal to complain about these days: the price of food and fuel, rising mortgage payments, shortages in the shops, strikes at Royal Mail and on the trains, and that's before we get to the politicians – plenty to go at there! Then there are chestnuts like our own health, or infirmity to grumble about, and of course the weather. And there are always plenty of other people to complain about too: those we find difficult, obnoxious, boring, selfish and rude. And if we are still feeling even a little positive there is still the modern world to have a go at: the dangers and pitfalls of the internet, the decline in standards of behaviour, and our own particular pet hates of the 21st century!

It wouldn't be difficult to spend our whole lives complaining, and perhaps we know some people who do? Perhaps we do ourselves and catch ourselves at it; I do sometimes; but it's not a good trait. Because although some people can be amusing for a while in their complaints we could do without that drip of negativity from day-to-day. Indeed complaining, or grumbling, can become quite corrosive.

I would distinguish grumbling and complaining from speaking thoughtfully about our genuine problems or concerns. That is different and can be very valuable and necessary to our wellbeing. Grumbling is more a habit we get into.

Saint Benedict recognises that danger and in chapter 23 of his rule he sets out sanctions for those who are found to be stubborn, disobedient or proud, and those who grumble. They should be warned twice privately by senior brother, then if things don't improve the offender should be rebuked publicly and finally if there is no reform they should be excommunicated. It is very striking that these serious penalties are set down as a proper punishment for unreformed grumbling or, as some translations have it, murmuring. Indeed, we might even find it shocking that such a commonplace expression should be so strictly dealt with.

But Benedict recognised very well the dangers of allowing grumbling, complaining, murmuring, to go unchecked. If it becomes a personal habit, then it can be catching and soon the whole community is caught in a downward spiral of negativity.

If grumbling and complaining is poison there is a powerful antidote: thanksgiving. To give thanks to God, as I believe we always should at the start of our prayers, is to

turn our minds to the good things that God has done for us and to the good which is God. Gratitude is our spiritual medicine. It is also a gracious and generous attitude to express to others. By offering them our thanks for what they have done we are showing an appreciation of them, as well as of their acts. And when we pause to give thanks to God it is an expression of worship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So, it's no coincidence that the central prayer of our worship is often called the Eucharistic Prayer. *Eucharistia* is a Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving' and the Eucharistic Prayer sets an act of thanksgiving at the heart of worship. It is usually introduced by what is called, in Latin, the 'Sursum Corda': Lift up your hearts; we lift them up unto the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God; it is right to give him thanks and praise. These words, said or sung, introduce a prayer which sets out the mighty acts of God and the sacrifice which Jesus made, and which calls down the Holy Spirit on the gifts of bread and wine and on those who share in them. And here, in St Michael's we often sing the first section of the prayer up to and including the Sanctus and Benedictus which heightens the sense of thanksgiving and awe as we come before God in worship. In a building such as this the music of the chant and the choir gently resounds and echoes the words of thanksgiving as we offer them to God with devotion and gratitude in our hearts.

And as such the Eucharistic Prayer reminds of what our whole lives should be: a hymn of love and thanks to the one who made us and sustains us. To say that my life, and probably yours, fall a long way short of that is to recognise our human nature. But thanksgiving is an attitude and a practice that we can grow into. It is not so far above us that we can't do a least a bit of it each day, perhaps even each hour and each moment. In fact it can be a spiritual form of mindfulness that constantly stops us and reminds us to appreciate the ordinary and the wonderful things that are around us – and to see that the ordinary things are often wonderful.

Harvest is an annual reminder of the importance of thanksgiving in our lives and worship and the invitation to contribute to the Exeter Food Bank, or other charities at Harvest time is a further reminder that a grateful heart will also tend to be a generous heart that wishes to share the blessings which it has received.

You would have thought that Jesus would commend those whose faith was large and strong. But in fact he extols the possibilities even of faith the size of a mustard seed.

We may well feel that our own faith is weak and ineffectual, making little difference to those around us, or perhaps even to ourselves. But Jesus makes it clear to his hearers that even a tiny speck of faith can achieve great things when we put it to God's service.

As we give thanks for all God's good gifts may we not forget that even when we feel as if our faith is failing God has in fact given us all the faith we need to follow him and to bear witness to his love in this world. The great saints and martyrs of our faith often showed great courage, but I wonder how brave or holy they felt at the time? Nevertheless their hearts were filled with joy and thanksgiving that they could give themselves up for the one who saved them from sin and destruction. Thanks be to God for all his benefits to us!