

**St. Ninian's Parish Church 1**  
**Sunday 11th March 2018**  
*Numbers 21: 4 - 9; John 3: 14 - 21*

The night before, looking at the breakfast menu, I decided that in the morning I would order, for breakfast, pancakes with crispy bacon and lots of maple syrup. It was the last thing I thought of before I fell asleep and the first thing I thought of when I woke up. It was what I ordered when I went downstairs to the breakfast room. It wasn't what arrived in front of me. What arrived in front of me were scrambled eggs; pale, yellow, sticky scrambled eggs on their own. I had already noticed that the staff were in a fanckle: orders were going missing; people were waiting an age for their breakfast; something was going wrong in the kitchen. So, what did I do with my eggs? Did I complain and send them back? No, I ate them. Then just as I was finishing, the American at the table beside me was presented with a delicious looking plate of pancakes, which she sent back because she had ordered scrambled eggs. It ruined my day.

We here today who are British would have been fine if it were we who were lost and hungry in the desert somewhere on the Sinai peninsula on our journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land. The British would be fine, because we are just too polite to complain and grumble. We don't want to make a fuss. However, the Hebrews who did complain, well they were punished with a plague of snakes for their grumbles. That's the sort of thing you might expect if you complain about your breakfast in the hotel that goes by the name of Faulty Towers.

This story that we read from the Book of Numbers about the Hebrews being punished for their complaining might help me to feel justified in my polite manners and uncomplaining ways, but the truth is that not eating those pancakes that morning ruined my day, and as you can tell, I haven't forgotten about it.

This story in the Book of Numbers about the Hebrews being punished for their complaining by a plague of snakes, and then being saved by a symbol of their instrument of suffering, bronze snakes, is not a story that encourages its readers to avoid complaining and grumbling about being hungry or anything else. If you are hungry, and you are given the wrong breakfast you should complain. This story is not about that.

This story is a story that, like the Gospel reading this morning, encourages its readers to have faith in the promises made to them, and not to be afraid of what causes our suffering. When we are no longer able to believe the promises made to us because we are afraid, then our lives start to fall apart, and nothing can save us. That is the moral of this story.

The British mythological character trait of not complaining isn't a good example to illustrate this story. However, if you do want a good example of what this story is about, an example of faith in promises made and not giving in to fear, particularly fear of death, then this week you should go to the cinema and watch the film called *Darkest Hour* in which the actor Gary Oldman won an Oscar last week for his portrayal of Winston Churchill.

The film shows how, when Churchill came to power, the British people were frightened of war and invasion, and Appeasement was still in the air. In the film Churchill's most immediate enemies seem to be Chamberlain and Halifax not Hitler and Mussolini. His first job as Prime Minister to save Britain and its Empire was to change attitudes in his cabinet and country. Symbolically in the film, it is the attitude of George VI that changes; the King, a sceptic of Churchill to begin with, becomes an encouraging supporter by the end.

It is, of course, Churchill's speeches that take centre stage in the film, and it is in these that we discover how promises and the symbol of fear can lead to salvation. At the heart of Churchill's most famous wartime speech these two things combine - promise and fear - to set the narrative of salvation.

It is the word 'shall' and the promise that it conveys that gives the speech much of its power,

*We **shall** fight them on the beaches, we **shall** fight them on the landing grounds, we **shall** fight in the fields and in the streets...*

It is a promise. If you believe it and have faith then you can take the next step tomorrow in to the uncertain and the unknown.

But, these words do more than that. They also take the very instrument of fear, the very reason for Appeasement, the very thing that people wished to avoid, and these words made that thing the instrument of salvation, something to be welcomed not appeased, to be looked forward to, not frightened of,

*We shall **fight** them on the beaches, we shall **fight** them on the landing grounds, we shall **fight** in the fields and in the streets...*

The way that people cope with the past and all that has happened in it that they regret, or that they are ashamed of, or that they want to forget, is by forgiveness, expressed as a combination of mercy and justice; I preached about that last year. Forgiveness is the way that the bible teaches us to cope with the past. But, the way that Bible encourages us to deal with the future: the uncertainty of it; the fear of it; the non-existence of it, is through promise. Promises made to us and by us, and our faith in them, our belief in them, our trust that they will be fulfilled are the way we can step forward in to the future with any confidence. Think of a couple getting married, they make promises to each other. Think of a baby being baptised, we make promises to it. Think of something as every-day as a pay-cheque, paid in arrears. We live with someone because we have believed the promises they made to us. We reassure our children by faithfully making promises to them. We continue working because we trust that our employer will pay us at the end of the month.

We are able to go on because we have faith, we believe, we trust in the future and what is promised for us there. Of course, the future doesn't always work out the way it was promised to us. When that happens, our lives start to fall apart: when we are lied to; when what we expect isn't fulfilled; when circumstances change for the worse. When that happens, when our lives start to fall apart in that way, we feel betrayed and victimised if others are the cause, or judged and punished if we ourselves are the cause.

In our story from Numbers the Hebrews lost their belief, trust and faith in God, and they felt judged by the plague of snakes because in their grumbling and complaining about the rigours of their journey they had stopped trusting in the promise that God had made them to lead them to the Promised Land.

But, there is more to the stories we read this morning about the Hebrews in the desert, and about Jesus being lifted up on the cross than just promises faithfully believed or unfaithfully disbelieved. These stories are also about the way these promises continue to work despite the fear of the future that so often plagues our lives. These stories are about how we confront our fears, and then use those fears as instruments of our salvation, much like Winston Churchill did in his speech.

Ultimately, it was fear that was used to threaten Jesus into submission. In the end, fear of death, of crucifixion, was used to confront Jesus to give up his mission to set people free from the religious and civic authority, which did not love them nor want them to live their lives fully, but instead wanted to suppress them and to control their lives totally. It was fear of death that was used to threaten Jesus into submission.

God wants us to be free to have life in all its fullness, eternal life it is called in the Gospel of John. Jesus brought that promise of good news, and because it threatened established religious and civic power they threatened to crucify him. And because he wouldn't betray the promise that love brings life in all its fullness, by avoiding the cross, they killed him. And then his followers kept his message and ministry alive by using the very instrument of his death, the cross, as their symbol of salvation, as we continue to do today.

The promise made to us in the Gospel, the good news, is that if we follow the way of Jesus then we will be saved in this world to live in a Kingdom of love, peace and merciful justice, on the way of love, peace and merciful justice, to live a life in all its fullness, eternal life. There are those in this world who for their own ends will try to betray that promise, to undermine it, to make sure it is not fulfilled. They will use fear to do so.

In order for life to exist something has to die. Have you eaten today or will you eat today? Most likely something animal or vegetable died so you could eat. Will you find shelter today? Most likely something else died in the construction of your house. What plastics will you make use of today? Something had to die to create the oil to create the plastic that makes your life more comfortable.

Your life is dependent on something else's ... death. Death is the engine of life; 300 million cells in your body die and are replaced every minute. Death is the engine of life literally in this world, but also symbolically and metaphorically. The cross, a symbol of the fear of death - death that undermines our belief in the promise of life, is the symbol of our turning our backs on fear, and of believing in the promise of our salvation.