

Sermon, 17 August 2025, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Exodus 16: 1-8 (taken from New International Version):

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" Moses also said, "You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord."

Text 2: John 16: 22-27 (taken from New International Version):

So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

"Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you

will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

Hypocrisy is something which we are rightly encouraged, if not instructed or even ordered, to avoid. Pretending to be something you're not, like lying, is another form of deceit. It undermines our faith completely when we pontificate about the injustices of the world while caring nothing for any poverty outside the Church walls. You certainly don't trust someone known to be a hypocrite.

But if you stop to think about it, in one form or another, it's almost innate. We're all guilty of some pretence to one extent or another. And is that always so bad ? Is politeness always that much worse than just telling someone up front that you find them insufferably dull ? Isn't diplomacy to a significant extent a form of communication where, on the one hand, everyone knows that everyone else is going through the motions but on the other hand, it does provide a means for hostile nations to be able to engage each other at least to a basic level ? Is journalism necessarily a lot better when reporters don't try to minimize their own political opinions on something in order to provide a neutral account ?

Let's take a hypothetical example. Let's assume, and I stress that this is theory only, that I myself, for reasons of upbringing, really do not care for members of another denomination. Yet I know that this Church, which I attend and love, readily accepts worshipers from all denominations and even religions. I don't want to let down the side, nor, logically, do I want to oppose the position of this Church. In my head, I know that all are welcome in this place. I just don't feel it. So if a member from another denomination turns up one Sunday and asks me, "Do you have a problem with (members of said denomination) ?" what do I say ? I'm not being asked if this Church has a problem – which it does not. I'm being asked what I think. Is it that bad if I fluff my response as opposed to giving a fully transparent answer ?

Well, yes and no. What I've just said is clearly somewhat simplistic. However, the dividing line between just trying to keep people happy and actually concealing something is not that clear every time. And it leads to another problem, especially for those of us who are regularly accused of simply trying to keep everyone happy.

That problem is one we see the result of in today's reading from Exodus. It's the problem of knowing what God wants and what we should be doing, but not being able to accept it with much enthusiasm. In the case of the Israelites, by this point they were past hypocrisy and were just complaining outright that following God seemed like an exercise in pointlessness. Until God, through Moses, had led them out of Egypt, they had been subjected to a horrendous system of slavery there. But that was forgotten pretty quickly in the desert of Sinai.

““If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted,” they claimed.

It's noteworthy, though, that out there in the desert, they were still actually following God. They didn't like it. They'd clearly lost their enthusiasm but they were doing it. Presumably because there wasn't any realistic alternative.

The response from God is perhaps surprising. Not least, because this is the God of the Old Testament, Who often appears as likely to send an invading army, a plague or a famine against those brazen enough to challenge the way where He leads. What we see next, however, is the God preached to us by Jesus. He tells Moses immediately that he will rain down food from the sky in quantities even beyond their dreams.

“You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him,” Moses tells them. And this is what happened when God sent quails and manna the next day.

Maybe this is what we need to think about when following God becomes something of a chore, a pointless exercise or even one which seems destined to fail. God is greater than all these challenges and just because we can't see where things are going, that doesn't mean that that's it. There's more there than we alone know. The Israelites' frustration is perhaps understandable, given that they could hardly have expected the solution which God sent. Yet that did not mean that it wasn't there. What God did call on them to do was to believe and to act their part in the solution. They were not just called to sit back and do nothing while He sorted out their problems. They were called to go out and to prepare a collection of food and a sacrifice to God on a joyful occasion.

Naivety doesn't help us but nor does abject cynicism. We are fooling ourselves and just pretending to others that we love and follow God if, in our own minds, we play our part in the Church out of a feeling of duty alone or just to keep somebody happy. What we have to do is to trust that there is more out there, that there is something which we ourselves do not know, maybe can't even imagine, but where it is still worth us following and playing our part. And we can rejoice in that. God does not call us to disaster. He asks us to work with Him to achieve something truly valuable and worth having.

Jesus told His Disciples in the passage we read: "Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." We are not naïve if we have enough faith to ask God to let us work with Him to achieve something. If we don't have even that level of faith, then truly we are hypocrites since what do we believe and is there any value to it? We might as well sit and watch television dramas as go to Church since neither will result in anything happening as a result of us doing something.

And taking that action is something which is worth having and that hope should be giving us genuine hope. Let's take a couple of examples.

Many of us are familiar with the work carried out today in Lalgadh Hospital and Leprosy Services Centre in Nepal, thanks to the engagement of our Congregation through Graeme and Meena's tireless work. It is one of the busiest leprosy hospitals globally and, "appears to manage more of both new and returning leprosy patients than any other leprosy hospital in the world," according to the website (you can complain to Graeme if that turns out to be out of date though I think it's a realistic assessment). Yet it's unlikely that Eileen Lodge, a British nurse who came to Nepal in the 1950s with little funding but a strong sense of God's calling to serve the afflicted, foresaw this scale of achievement. After many years serving others, she was the one who, in 1977, heard God's call to establish what was eventually to open in 1996 as Lalgadh Hospital, and is still going even stronger today. We can only imagine how much faith in something worth having must have been needed to overcome the toil, drudgery and – though I'm guessing here – the temptation to doubt. But there's no doubt today that something worth having was achieved.

Closer to home, in 2023, there was a financial crisis. As one of those responsible for the analysis which prompted it, I can assure you that it was quite distressing to see

a series of tables and graphs which indicated that the long-term decline in the Church's financial health was likely to see it close its doors for good by 2030. We were supposed to be one of the better-off Congregations in the International Presbytery but a fiscal pulse check was giving us a very limited life expectancy. It wasn't helped by the fact that the analysis identified a shrinking size of Congregation as the main root of the problem, particularly in the post-COVID environment.

This problem had been there for at least a decade, if not longer, but had been accelerated during the 2020 lockdown. It was also hardly unique to Geneva but similar issues were being felt across the Church of Scotland. So it was hardly easy for anyone to feel very joyful or optimistic about what could be achieved. Thankfully, however, that didn't stop the Congregational Committee and Kirk Session trying.

The results were truly impressive and unexpected. The Church's income shot upwards in the last two months of 2023, basically re-setting the accounting clock to around 2019 levels. More importantly, the Future Focus initiative was launched with three brainstorming meetings of the Congregation to plot our way forward. Attendance almost crowded out the Salle at times and ideas to boost the Congregation and Church life flowed forth. Various groups were suggested and outreach efforts followed. The effects are still being felt but the point here is that one year beforehand, working on assessments and management reports for the Church was not something to generate a lot of enthusiasm, if anything quite the opposite. But the Congregational Committee, the Kirk Session and then the whole Congregation decided that we were following God for a purpose and the only way to make that purpose valuable, was to take it in hand and act.

So let's not pretend that we just believe that everything will work out OK or even that it doesn't really matter. Let's not work away at whatever we do in the Church because it has to be done but really, we don't see what the point is (even if we don't say as much). Let's take an honest look at what we believe and see what we actually hope for. Then let's have enough hope to act. If we act with a real sense of joyful optimism in the value of what we do, the risk of harmful cynicism, of being a Church which doesn't really believe in what it is doing, will not be there to harm us. People with that sense of purpose do not come across as hypocritical. People who genuinely believe in their Church and what it can do are not just there for the ride.

A Congregation which believes in itself and what it can do together with God, is one which will only ever show a genuine faith.

To finish with what Moses told the Israelites: “In the morning you will see the glory of the Lord.”