

### 3 September 2017: The grumblers!

It would be wonderful to be able to tell you that the people of Israel, God's chosen people had learnt to trust God now that they had his laws and his tabernacle to worship in, but it didn't happen that way!

The next book in the Bible, Numbers, tells the rest of the story. But, if you were to try to read the first 4 chapters, you would probably give up! It contains lots and lots of numbers and names and commands. The details were very important to the Hebrews, but are rather boring for us. But, in between the numbers, is something which we need to learn.

Perhaps a better name for the Book of Numbers would be the Book of Grumbles! This book tells us about the complaints the Hebrews had during their great adventure escaping from Egypt. And we see what happened as a result.

Adventures sound great when we read about them, but they aren't necessarily so wonderful when we experience them. The Hebrews experienced sand, sun, scorpions and travelling all the time – no wonder they felt like complaining. But they were forgetting the bigger picture! God was keeping his promises. He was taking them to their own land – just as he had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was going to make the whole world a better place because of them. This was his rescue plan! They were special!

Sometimes they must have longed to be un-special and comfortable. They longed for the life they had lived in Egypt with cucumbers to cut up for supper, with fresh fish caught in the Nile, with melons and leeks and onions and garlic. (Numbers 11: 4, 5) They began to forget how hard life had been in Egypt. They forgot how they had begged God to rescue them.

Despite their complaints, God went on providing what they needed. There was a time, for instance when Moses hit the rock and water rushed out! On another occasion God showed Moses how to make the water sweet by throwing in a piece of wood! (Exod 15:23) God provided them with 'bread rain' as manna each night and he gave them meat for each evening meal. Time and time again God helped them out with wonderful miracles, but the complaints went on.

The worst of these complaints came when they reached the land that God had promised to them. They were near enough to see the land and they were probably looking forward to being settled. God told them to choose a man from each of the tribes to spy out the land and report back.

These 12 men spent 40 days having a good look round the amazing land that God had chosen for them, with figs and grapes and pomegranates. The men picked a bunch of grapes that was so heavy that two men had to work together to carry it back! (Num 13:21-27) Yet 10 of the men brought back a negative report! They were scared because the people there were strong and the cities were heavily guarded. They thought that anyone entering that country would be wiped out. They reported that it was useless to go there.

Then the other 2 spies, Joshua and Caleb, spoke up. These two men argued that the land was wonderful and that, if God wanted them to have it, then God would organise that they could move in there. They argued that the people must trust God and go ahead into the land of 'milk and honey'.

They were howled down! The people wanted to stone them. God was deeply upset by this rebellion. He was tired of all the grumbles but he wanted the world to be blessed through them. How could he bless a world which thought he was useless?

To teach them that he was great enough to be trusted, God punished them by deciding that the older generation would die in the wilderness and only the younger Hebrews would enter the land. Caleb and Joshua would survive and Joshua would lead the others in to this wonderful land.

The people immediately apologised and even invaded the land to claim it. But now they were acting without God's help and everyone who went in was killed! They had to learn to rely on God.

And so it was that for 40 more years – one year for every day the spies had been in Canaan - the Israelites wandered around, grumbling, in the wilderness. The older generation, even Moses, died there. Only, those who didn't remember Egypt survived to enter the Promised Land.

This sounds harsh, but book five, Deuteronomy, reminds us what Moses told the people before he died. Forty years later as he stood facing the Promised Land, Moses retold the stories of all God's goodness to them. "Deuteronomy" means 'the second telling of the law' but perhaps we could call this 'the book of reminders'. Moses reminded the people of all that had happened to them. Despite their grumbles God had not abandoned them.

Jesus often quoted from Deuteronomy so we realise that we should allow it to remind us of those times. But we mustn't just read it as a story from history! Deuteronomy reminds us that here are consequences if we forget or disobey God – but that he never stops loving us. If we trust in his love, we shall be blessed and we shall be a blessing to others and, one day, we shall enter the promised land of heaven. There will be rough times – usually because we grumble and forget to trust – but God is on our side!