

*Numbers 11.4-6,10-16,24-29*

*James 5.13-20*

*Mark 9.38-50*

Some of us will remember long car journeys as children, or perhaps with children. And we will be familiar with the refrain, 'Are we nearly there yet?' Or perhaps, 'I'm hungry'. Today in our first reading from Numbers we have the children of Israel on a long journey with Moses in the driving seat. And they are clearly trying his patience. In spite of the fact that they have just been released from bitter slavery in Egypt. In spite of the fact that as they passed through the Red Sea, their lives were spared while the pursuing Egyptians were all drowned, the children of Israel are having a whinge. They are bored with having to eat manna day after day. They want some meat. Some variety. And they are nostalgic about all the food they used to eat in Egypt. The fish. The cucumbers, the melons and the garlic. And Moses is starting to lose his temper. This trip to the Sinai is not turning out the way he had imagined. How is he supposed to get meat to feed them? He asks God. It isn't as if there is a motorway service station he could pop into.

In the end of course, God sent quail on the camp and the people were able to eat meat. But before that, God told Moses to find seventy elders to help him look after the people. Responsibility was shared. We see a similar model in the Letter of James. Where the elders of the church pray for the sick and anoint them with oil. These models of shared leadership are good models for us as church. Lots of people take responsibility for lots of different areas of our church's life.

In the past two weeks since I became Vicar of St John's there have been times when I have felt a bit like Moses. Like him, I have occasionally thought, 'O my goodness. What have I done?' I have felt a rather overwhelmed by the number questions that I'm supposed to have answers to. But the truth is, I don't have to have all the answers. The answers lie with God of course and with all of you. It is my job to help us listen to God and draw together the different parts of the picture that each of you has. So that we can create the whole and build up the body of Christ in this place.

And I know people are anxious to get on with things. There has been a lot of waiting. A lot of frustration. But we have time. Maybe not the forty years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness. But we do have time. I'm not going anywhere and we need to make good decisions without rushing into things.

One of the things that we all share responsibility for and that is always important is safeguarding. Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. We are fortunate to have a number of children in our choirs and congregation and I hope that we will have more in the future. We also have vulnerable adults and many of us will be vulnerable adults at one time or another in our lives. Keeping people safe is a really important priority. As we know from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the Church has not always fulfilled its responsibilities to keep children safe. There is much to repent of. In our Gospel, Jesus has harsh words for those who put stumbling blocks in the way of little ones. It would be better, he says, if a great millstone had been hung around their necks and they had been thrown into the sea.

Jesus goes on to use some rather extreme language about cutting off hands and feet and tearing out eyeballs. He is not being literal here. But he does point to the fact that there are some things that cannot be accommodated or excused. We know that abuse blights lives and can have repercussions for generations. So we need to do all that we can to keep children and vulnerable adults safe. We are blessed in this church in having robust safeguarding policies. We also have an excellent safeguarding coordinator in Claire and we are

able to share expertise with other churches. But safeguarding is the responsibility of all of us and our systems will only be effective if we all play our part in implementing them.

Being vigilant does mean however that we need to be paranoid or fearful. Church should always be a place where there is room for all sorts of people. And one of the things that I am starting to love about St John's is the variety of characters that it has within it. And the great range of gifts that different people bring.

That variety can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and disagreements. Some of us approach issues in different ways. It would be nice if everyone was like us and did things our way but the world and the church are not like that. We all have our different parts to play and we need to celebrate that diversity. Not just in St John's but in our mission partnership and deanery. In both our reading from Numbers and our Gospel today, God empowers people to do things differently. In the Book of Numbers, we see Eldad and Medad prophesying outside the tent. In our Gospel we see someone other than the disciples casting out demons. People wanted to stop them. To impose some sort of uniformity and order. But both Moses and Jesus tell them it's OK. These people are doing God's work. And it's not always tidy or uniform. We need to thank God for the way he pours out his spirit in different ways on different people. And we need to think about how we can work with those who are different to us. Using the different gifts that God has given to us to build up the body of Christ.

God has made each of us unique. Each one of us is blessed with particular gifts and qualities that enable us to play our part as members of this church. And we are called to do that to the very best of our ability. To remain salty as it says in our Gospel. Catherine Ogle, the Dean of Winchester, used to be the Dean of my former Cathedral at Birmingham. Her title as Dean is the Very Revd Catherine Ogle. But one of the utility companies that supplied her house didn't quite get it right. They wrote to her simply as the Very Catherine Ogle. She thought about phoning up and asking them to change it but in the end decided not to bother. It reminded her to be very herself. Fully the person God had made her to be. I hope that we can all be very ourselves. Very much the people God made us to be. Unique and special. And I hope too that St John's can be very St John's. Not trying to do everything but doing what it does to the very best of its ability. Being the best St John's it can be. As individuals and as a church, I hope that we can all be salty, and be at peace with one another. Amen.