“Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”

Both our readings today are about grumbling. The Israelites grumbled in the wilderness. Life in the desert was hard, they looked back to their days of slavery when at least they had bread to eat.

The workers in the vineyard grumbled, the wages seemed unfair. Why should those who came last receive the same as those who had toiled all day in the merciless heat?

People are quick to complain. Someone this week complained that the church door was locked – maybe they hadn’t noticed that for the past six months we’ve been in a global pandemic so leaving churches open for anyone to wander in and out of isn’t a terribly good idea.

Someone else complained that their father’s grave had been vandalised. I hadn’t spotted any vandalism, could they tell me which grave it was. They told me. And when did you last visit the grave? In 1947 at his funeral.

Well that’s not vandalism, that’s 60 years of neglect.

So they asked me what the church was going to do about it. I told them we’d send them a bill to make it safe as it’s their responsibility. I never heard from them again.

St Benedict is very tough on people who complain. He will tolerate all kinds of failures and signs of human weakness, but he will not abide complaining. Within the community there must be no signs of murmuring he says. Grumbling is a corrosive force that destroys and weakens both the individual and the community. Murmuring starts small, a thoughtless comment, a moment of frustration, a cruel word. But it spreads quickly and in the human soul grumbling takes root and nurtures a bitter harvest.

Grumbling is the first sign of a me centred soul, and a sign of a fear focussed life. Most grumbling has its roots in what I think I’m going to lose.

There is a bit in the story of the people in the wilderness that we don’t hear this morning, our reading finishes a couple of verses too early. If we’d read on just a bit further we’d have heard the bit about the people who didn’t trust that enough was enough.

They were told to gather enough for the day – that was God’s test. Can you live with enough being enough? Or are you living a me centred, fear focussed life?

There was enough for everyone, so no-one needed to collect more than enough – but as we discover – not everyone believed that. Those who collected more than enough found it went bad overnight. Those who gathered much had nothing left over, those who gathered little has no shortage.

When Jesus speak of the Kingdom of God he deliberately told stories that would startle and disturb. Parable of the Kingdom shake presuppositions and turn expectations on their head. When God gives he gives freely and graciously, he gives enough, he asks us to accept that enough and to accept his generosity to others.

That is a way of living which is not of this world, because it is a sign of a different reality.

There is of course a complaint here. That the people who had been told this when they were refugees in the wilderness didn’t listen and didn’t change how they lived.

When they were given a land they were told to reap their harvests leaving the edge of the fields uncut. The edges were for the poor, the widows, orphans and refugees.

They were told not to accumulate wealth that divided the rich and the poor – every year of Jubilee all debts were to be cancelled, the divisions in society levelled.

We know they did not listen, either to the original sign of God’s gracious generosity, or to the many prophets who over generations repeated the message.

Until God sent his Son to tell them again – with parables which repeated the original message. That God’s way is different, forming different shaped lives, different shaped people, different shaped community, a different shaped world.

There is a complaint here. The same complaint as when Jonah grumbled that God had spared Ninevah. The same complaint as when the elder son was outraged at his father throwing a party for his prodigal brother. The same complaint as when the self-righteous Pharisee compared himself to the repentant publican. The same complaint as when Jesus went home with Zacchaeus.

But this is not just a complaint. This is a diagnosis, and a diagnosis of an ill God has acted to restore.