

31st May 2022

Contentment

**“We loathe our manna, and we long for quails;
Ah! what is man, when his own wish prevails!”**

John Dryden, *The Medal*

When the 18th century English poet, John Dryden, wrote his epic poem, *The Medal*, he explored in a massive 321 lines many things about the human condition. The quotation above from the middle of the poem touches on human desire and how it can lead to greed: when we have enough, we still yearn for more, what we might consider brighter, and better, and greater. We want quails when we already have manna!

The metaphor comes from the story of the Children of Israel in their desert wanderings after their captivity in Egypt. God has provided for them, we're told, when "manna", a bread-like substance, appears around them everything morning. They have enough for each day. If they are greedy and gather more than they need, it will spoil. It's the "buy-one-get-one-free" syndrome. Grab too much, and some of it will go to waste. But manna, it seems, isn't enough for them, even though they have plenty. They yearn for quails – which God also provides for them, as it turns out.

Dryden uses this image to question a worrying facet of the human condition: we who have enough always seem to yearn for more; we who have what we need to live on always seem to strive for what's better, and bigger, and more special. Quails, it seems, are better than manna. Manna, it seems, is not enough when quails might be on offer.

Where is our contentment with what we have? Where is our thankfulness for what we are already provided with? "What is man", asks Dryden, what is the human condition, "when his own wish prevails", when what we desire takes precedence over all else?

Titus Lucretius Carus, the 1st century BC Roman poet, asks an important question in *De Rerum Natura*:

*Why not, like a banqueter fed full of life,
withdraw with contentment and rest in peace, you fool?*

Why not, indeed? When we have our manna, what fools we are to yearn for quails – and much more besides.

A prayer for today

Lord, help me to be content, and to rest in peace with you. Amen