

St Mary's Holy Communion 7th October 2018

Trinity 19 / Proper 22

The Book of Job – Part 1

Job 1:1, 2:1-10 Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 Mark 10:2-16

We enter this week into one of the most difficult books of the Old Testament: the book of Job. Virginia Woolf spoke for many readers of Job when she wrote to a friend: "I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out of it well."

I am making extensive use of a very helpful commentary on Job [by Kathryn M Schifferdecker, on the 'Working Preacher' website, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/>]. I will start by reading part of that her commentary and then make a link with the other readings.

What do we do with a story in which God and Satan make a wager, with Job as a pawn in their game? What do we do with a book in which 10 children are killed off in the first chapter, only to be replaced by 10 more in the last chapter (as if children were replaceable)? or in which God answers Job's anguish by browbeating him into submission at the end of the story? no, God, at least on a first reading, does not come out of this book well.

And yet the book of Job has spoken profoundly to people of faith down the centuries. Job wrestles honestly with God. He holds on to God with fierce faith, and he doesn't let God off the hook for the suffering that so often shadows this world.

This week's reading introduces us to Job and his suffering. The following weeks will give us a taste of Job's complaint, and God's response to it.

These first two chapters pose difficult questions. What are we to make of the figure of Satan, and his wager with God? How do we make sense of the undeserved loss of wealth and family Job experiences in Chapter 1, or the loathsome sores inflicted in Chapter 2?

The first step is to understand what sort of book Job is. The prologue begins: 'There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job'. It's like the opening of a folktale, 'Once upon a time, in a land far away'. It is not rooted in any historical context and the place Uz does not appear anywhere else in the Bible.

In other words, we should read Job not as history, but as an extended parable. It tries to answer the question: what can one say about God and faith in the midst of extreme and undeserved suffering?

So to our first question: Who is this 'Satan'? Wherever the word 'Satan' appears here, a definite article is attached to it. "Ha-Shatan" is not so much a name as a title: The Satan. To "shatan" in Hebrew is to accuse, to indict, or to be hostile towards. The Satan in Job, though ominous, is not the full-blown demonic figure he has become by the New Testament.

In Job, then, The Satan is a member of God's heavenly court, with the task of investigating what human beings are up to on earth. In Chapter 1, when God draws The Satan's attention to Job's piety, he accuses Job of self-interest: 'Does Job fear God for nothing?

Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has? Take it away, and Job will curse you.' God answers: 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!'

What's going on with this wager between God and The Satan? Nowhere else in scripture does God use human beings as pawns in a divine chess match. But again, remember this is a parable, not history. Perhaps the best way is to see this as a radical act of trust on God's part. God trusts Job to prove The Satan wrong about faith.

God's great desire is to be in relationship with us human beings. But we fail again and again to love God with all our heart, soul, mind & strength. Job does fulfil that command; he is a person of perfect integrity and faith. But what are his motives? Does even the most faithful person serve God only for what they get out of it? Is it possible to love God for who God is, and not for hope of reward? Is it possible for the relationship between God and humanity to be truly unselfish? God is staking a lot on Job's response.

Now we turn to Job and his sufferings. Job responds to his misfortunes twice in this prologue. At the end of Chapter 1, after he's lost all his wealth and his children, he says: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'. Job's faith and trust in God appear unshaken at this point.

In Chapter 2, after he is afflicted by boils, and told by his wife to 'Curse God and die,' his response is more ambivalent, but still faithful: "Shall we receive good at the hand of God and not bad?"

Job responds to the loss of all he holds dear by praising the One who gave him those gifts. Stripped of all that gave his life meaning, Job clings to the God who gave him life in the first place.

Some dismiss these words of Job as overly pious and unhelpful to those who are suffering. But they can't be read without taking into account the 35 chapters of rage and despair that come after. These are not Job's last word on suffering, and the long and anguished lament that follows, is also an expression of faith.

Praise and lament are two sides of the same coin. In both we cling to God, even when we don't understand God. In both praise and lament, we acknowledge that God is God and we are not.

Lament will be the focus of next week's reading. For now, many of us are all-too-familiar with the kind of suffering Job describes and the questions it raises. Perhaps it is enough to sit with Job on the ash heap for a while in silence, mourning for what is lost and waiting for what will be. There will be more in next week's sermon.

now let's look at our other readings: whatever we make of Job, as Christians our understanding of suffering must be shaped by our understanding of Jesus; it is through the lens of his suffering that our own can take on new meaning

the letter to the Hebrews, that we start reading from today, places Jesus' suffering into a cosmic framework, the great plan of God for all creation; in Chapter 1 we hear how Jesus is heir of all things, he shares in creation, he reflects God's glory and sustains the world

then we jump to Chapter 2, where the writer is trying to make sense of the idea that this cosmic, eternal Jesus became a human being and suffered a hideous death; the point made here is that this humiliation had a purpose:

Jesus is now ‘crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone’; Jesus has been ‘made perfect through sufferings’, in order to ‘bring many children to glory’

Jesus suffered and is now exalted; therefore we, his brothers and sisters will also be exalted; though that doesn’t let us off the suffering along the way, our suffering can have a purpose too, in shaping us and helping us to see our need of God

of course, we don’t like this; it’s not a comfortable answer to the ‘problem of suffering’; we’d much rather have a nicely organised system where we can guarantee our own comfort by following the rules; if we behave ourselves, nothing bad will happen; many do look on faith as offering that kind of guarantee, but Jesus teaches us something rather different the Pharisees who challenge him in our gospel reading are the great rule-makers and rule-keepers; ‘do as we tell you, and you’ll be in favour with God and all will be well’; but Jesus is shaking these ideas up, so they come to test his authority; the topic they choose is divorce, but it could have been any number of others

the irony is that Christians use Jesus’ answer to this challenge as setting out yet more rules to be followed, this time, about the rights and wrongs of divorce; but this is to miss the point I think; look at the verses that follow, about Jesus welcoming children and blessing them, against the protests of his disciples; Jesus is saying to us, ‘stop trying to organise God; instead embrace the faith of a child’

when a child is in pain, they don’t need a carefully reasoned argument about the cause and purpose of suffering; they just need a parent’s arms around them; they need to trust that parent understands their suffering, and knows what can be done to ease it; that is the kind of faith we are called to have in our heavenly Father

the God that Jesus reveals to us is one who understands and has shared in our suffering; but he also sees the big picture – he sees that, as Mother Julian of Norwich put it, ‘All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well’; that is the hope that the cross of Christ gives to us in our struggles

this hope may be hard to see or believe in; just a pinprick of light at the end of a very long tunnel; but it is there, and that is where we are heading