

St Francis & St Mary's Holy Communion 14th October 2018

Trinity 20 / Proper 23

Job II

Job 23:1-9,16-17 Hebrews 4:12-16 Mark 10:17-31

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

last week we were introduced to Job and his suffering, and the mysterious wager between God and The Satan, The Accuser. I suggested we should read Job as 'parable' rather than 'history'; some found that idea helpful – some not! I would not want to be dogmatic about the question!

In one way, a lot has happened since last week's reading. In other ways, nothing much has changed. Job still sits on an ash heap, bereft of children and wealth, covered with painful sores and surrounded by three "friends" who tell him that it's all his fault. They believe suffering is always the result of sin, so they accuse Job of some hidden sin to protect themselves from the chaos that has engulfed him.

We do the same thing, though more subtly. When we hear of a tragedy, our gut reaction is often to reason to ourselves why it wouldn't happen to us: 'They built their house in a flood plain. He wasn't watching his child closely enough. She lives in the wrong neighbourhood.' This instinct begins early. When the commentary writer's 8-year-old daughter heard of a 9-year-old child who had been shot, her first reaction was "But the child was a boy, right?"

Through it all, Job holds on to his integrity. He knows he's done nothing to deserve this suffering: "Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days". Suffering is not always the result of sin, claims Job; that was a radical assertion in his day, and it's an important one to affirm even today.

If you read all the speeches of Job and his "friends" you may find them repetitive, even tedious. But there are some important moves that Job makes in these long chapters of dialogue. He begins in chapter 3, with a curse on the day of his birth, wishing that he had never been born. But now he moves from wishing for death to seeking for justice; he moves from silent despair to lament.

Today's reading sets out this theme: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me." We hear God's answer to Job's demand for justice next week.

Another move Job makes is from speaking only about God to speaking directly to God, and his words are often bitter, even desperate. He accuses God of watching him like a hawk, of waiting for him to sin. He despairs of ever getting a hearing with God: "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him". But even though feeling God's absence, Job never gives up on speaking to him

This move from speaking about God to speaking to God is a move that Job's companions never make. They give Job ample advice on the causes of suffering; they claim to speak for God; but they never once intercede for their suffering friend, a failing for which they are chastised by God at the end.

This is a mistake many of us make in the face of tragedy, of trying to 'justify' God; we say: "God needed your mother/brother/child in heaven." "Everything happens for a reason." "God is testing you."

Job will have none of this: he speaks to God directly, honestly, with all his anger, pain, and grief, because he knows God is big enough to handle it. Even in the depths of despair, Job addresses God and demands that God answer him; he holds on to God with a fierce faith and in that holding on, something like hope is born, expressed in these best-known words of Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God"

At the end of this week's reading, we are still on the ash heap with Job, but we have learned from him how to lament, how to bring our anger, pain, grief and despair directly to God, even when we feel only God's absence. We have learned from him how to have hope, even if only a little, holding on to God with a fierce faith, trusting that God is God, trusting that God will hear, and will answer. And that answer will come, not one that Job (or we) could have imagined, but an answer nonetheless. ... more next week ... now to other readings ...

as I was saying in the first of these sermons, as Christians our understanding of these questions must be shaped by our understanding of Jesus; it is through the lens of his suffering that our own can take on new meaning

at the start of the passage from Hebrews 4, we seem still to be in the world of Job, exposed to the 'word of God, that is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword'; all are 'naked and laid bare' before God, there is no escape from his judgement; this is potentially a terrifying prospect!

but then Jesus, the 'great high priest', steps onto the scene; earlier in this letter, he's been shown superior to angels, to Moses and Joshua; now begins a long account of his superiority to Aaron and the old priesthood, for Jesus has 'passed through the heavens' to the highest place, at the side of God himself

but this exaltation now holds no terror for us, for this high priest is able to 'sympathise with our weaknesses'; he has been 'tested as we are', therefore we may 'approach the throne of grace with boldness' and find there ears that are open to our prayers

because of all that Jesus has suffered for our sakes, he understands us, he is on our side, and ready to speak on our behalf; for Job, God is an incalculable, invisible, unavailable deity, who passes judgement from a distance, yet won't listen to the pleading of his case; for us, through Jesus, the way is now open to the heavenly throne

for us it is now the 'throne of grace', and there we 'may receive mercy and find grace to help' in time of our need: this surely the best of good news! surely Job's anguished questions begin to find an answer here!

in Mark 10, a man comes to Jesus asking: ‘good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’; he is, in a way, the heir of Job’s comforters, looking for some system, some way of being good enough for God; he’s not a bad person – his wealth is already a sign of God’s blessing (or so he thinks); he has ‘kept the commandments’ as an obedient Jew; is that enough, or is there more?

as last week, with the issue of divorce, there’s a tendency for Christians to use Jesus’ reply as imposing yet more rules, as setting yet another, higher standard of goodness to aspire to: ‘sell what you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven’

‘this is hard’, say the disciples – and we too! ‘then who can be saved?’ ‘we’ve given up everything to follow you, Jesus’, says Peter, ‘is that enough for you?’

but that question again shows that they are still thinking the old way, calculating goodness and merit, and hoping God will think it enough; and that really misses the whole point of Jesus

this man’s wealth – our own wealth and comfort – are not bad in themselves; the blessing only becomes a curse, when it holds us back from that child-like faith Jesus says we must have, to enter his kingdom and start to follow him

Jesus promises his disciples the ultimate restoration of all they’ve given up for him – along with persecutions! we will see a similar restoration at the end of the story of Job; the question is, will he, will we, have learned the lesson along the way, the lesson of God’s under-served grace and love? we can never be good enough for that!

can we really let go of that inner self-dependence, and throw ourselves utterly into the arms of grace that are always open to welcome us?

can we be saved? ‘for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible’

‘let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’