

Christ the Worker Morning Worship 21st October 2018

Trinity 21 / Proper 24 Job III

Job 38:1-7,34-41 Hebrews 5:1-10 Mark 10:35-45

Today is our last visit to Job, for which I have written a short sermon series. I shall give a short summary of the first two sermons, talk about the final sections of Job, and then connect with today's other readings [see web]

[Summary of sermons 1 & 2:

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." 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 (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. How are we to make sense of this as 'God's word' to us?

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

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 then he moves from wishing for death to seeking for justice; he moves from silent despair to lament.

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. But even though feeling God's absence, Job never gives up on speaking to him.

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 last week's reading, we were still on the ash heap with Job, but we'd 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 learned from Job how to have hope, even if only a little, holding on to God with a fierce faith, trusting that God will hear, and will answer. And that answer begins in today's passage ...]

Like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Job responds to his troubles by wishing he'd never been born. But Job doesn't get a visit from a portly, comforting Clarence the Angel. Instead, the One who appears to Job is none other than God himself. God doesn't come to comfort Job. Instead, he lays into him, lecturing him from the centre of a cyclone:

‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.’

God does not address Job's situation or his questions about justice. God does not even acknowledge Job's suffering. Instead, he takes him on a whirlwind tour of the cosmos, beginning with the foundation of the earth, and the birth of the sea. [Read chapters 38 to 41! eat your heart out David Attenborough!] God introduces Job and us to a world full of wonders, and much, much bigger than ourselves.

These speeches of God at the end of the book of Job leave many readers dissatisfied. We want explanations. We want God to tell Job about the wager with Satan. We want God to apologize for Job's suffering. We want God to be at least, comforting. How does this tour of nature speak to Job and his situation?

At the start of the book, Job was the centre of his universe, sitting in judgement at the city gate, surrounded by family and possessions, and admired by one and all. Job and his ‘friends’ thought that the world ran by a strict system of justice, where the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished.

God's answer is to break open Job's world and expand his vision to include places and creatures Job never imagined. God gives his creatures the freedom to be who they're created to be, wild and beautiful.

This world is not centred on human beings – not on Job, you or me. It is not an entirely safe or predictable world, but it is beautiful and good nonetheless. God speaks of a world of freedom and grace rather than one of reward and retribution.

Is this an adequate response to all Job's suffering? It is not, on the face of it, very comforting. Nonetheless, these speeches of God accomplish something profound. They move Job out of his cycle of grief and anger into life again. They enable him to live freely in a world full of both heart-breaking suffering and heart-stopping beauty.

Moving on to the final sections of Job [set for next week: **Job 42:1-6,10-17**]

Job responds to God's tour of the universe by acknowledging that he has neither God's power nor God's wisdom. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know". He had accused God of creating a world of chaos, and God showed Job the world as it really is: a place of order, but also of freedom and beauty, and not centred on human beings.

And somehow, through that vision of creation, Job's hope is fulfilled. Earlier, in the throes of despair, Job proclaimed, ‘I know that my Redeemer lives’. Now, Job says to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you". Job's profound desire to be in the presence of God has been fulfilled. He has seen God. And that encounter with God moves him out of despair into life again.

Job does not abjectly repent on his ash heap, browbeaten into submission. Instead, he realizes anew his place in the world. Job is not the centre of the universe, but he has a role to play in it; and he takes up that role again in the final verses, describing the restoration of his family and fortunes. Job has learned the lesson of God's free generosity, that does not depend on his own merit or deserving. And that's a lesson we all need to learn.

now to today's other readings: as noted in the previous sermons in this series, as Christians our understanding of the questions Job raises must be shaped by our understanding of Jesus; it is through the lens of his life, death and resurrection that our own situation, our own suffering can take on new meaning

Hebrews 5 continues the theme of Jesus as our 'great high priest'; like Aaron and the old priesthood, Jesus takes this role as one called by God; but for Jesus this calling involves him 'learning obedience through suffering'; because of the sacrifice that Jesus has made on our behalf, he understands us, he is on our side, he is able to 'deal gently with the ignorant and wayward' – with us

for Job, God was an incalculable, invisible, unavailable deity, who passed judgement from a distance, yet wouldn't listen to the pleading of his case; for us, through Jesus, the way is now open to the heavenly throne, the 'throne of grace', and Jesus is now 'the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'; that surely is good news for us, when we're going through hard times!

in Mark 10, how hard the disciples still find it to understand this humble, generous God, who reveals himself to them in Jesus! a couple of verses earlier, Jesus yet again set out for them what lies ahead: 'the Son of Man will be condemned to death and killed; and three days later he will rise'; but all James and John can think of is jostling for places of honour by Jesus' side; and the other ten are annoyed in case they have missed out! they really don't get Jesus, do they? they don't get the Servant King, who 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'?

they will need to see him suffer, die and rise again, before they're ready to follow in his footsteps, to 'be baptised with his baptism [i.e. his death], and to drink the cup that he has drunk [i.e. his suffering]'

now we have the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight; but do we really understand any better this idea of God's free grace? do we still think the old way, like Job and his friends, calculating goodness and merit, and hoping God will think it enough? or have we learned the lesson of God's undeserved grace and love?

we really must let go of that inner self-dependence, and recognise that we can never be 'good enough for God', but that he loves us anyway! will we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of grace that are always open to welcome us?