

Sunday 10th October 2021 Pent 20

Job 23:1-9 & 16-17.

Why me? What have I done?

The Book of Job stands alone amongst the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. No one knows who wrote it, or just when it was written, but the story is set in the form of an ancient folktale circulating orally among the oriental wise people of the time.

Around the sixth century a Poet of the Exile used it as a setting for a discussion between an impatient Job and his three so called, wise friends.

To make sense of the writing (Poetry) we have to understand the historical setting in which Judah was at that time. The Jews had been home, after their release from captivity in Babylon, for just over 100 years or more. This period in their history must have been just about as difficult as their time in captivity. These were years of hardship and distress. Unhappiness was rife. Strife, oppression and poverty disfigured life in Jerusalem and the surrounding country. Through injustice, bigotry and indifference some Jews had contributed to the distress of their fellow country folk.

This distress and distrust were compounded by others who had come to settle in their land. People who had been dispossessed of their native territory and possessions arrived destitute seeking somewhere to live. This intensified the confusion and distrust.

Sounds a wee bit like the response in many countries of the world today, doesn't it, as refugees seek safety in a land which is not their home. Some leaders have addressed this "problem" by building walls to keep those seeking refuge out of their lands.

Against this background the Book of Job is written in poetic form asking the questions, "Do people fear God for naught? Who is God that we should believe in Him or fear him? If God is good, just and loving why does God let innocent people suffer? Why does God let us suffer?"

As people go, Job is just about the most righteous, God fearing, good man on earth. Yet calamity, blamed on Satan, (the Tempter) overwhelms him – he loses everything he has – his stock, his house, his children and his health. From being one of the wealthiest people in the land he becomes one of the most destitute.

Not that Job knows it, but Satan is up in the heavenly Courts having a conversation with God and setting up Job for his downfall. It is as if there is a battle of confidence taking place between God and Satan. God trusts Job's faithfulness, but Satan says Job is nothing but a shallow rooted tree which will topple in the next strong wind. Satan provides the strong wind.

Will Job fall or will he hold on to his firm faith in God?

As Job struggles with his loss, pain and affliction his friends offer what they perceive to be sound advice based on the wisdom of the age. Job's wife supports the friends and takes their side. Job must have done something to offend God and therefore he is being punished. The orthodox theology of the day – the position championed by Job's three friends and his wife – was that prosperity was God's reward for good living, calamity and hardship (such as Job was suffering) was God's judgement on his sinfulness. Job's friends and his wife all follow the rule – that if Job is suffering then he must be a wicked man.

In Eliphaz' first speech he basically tells Job to suck it up. Job above all people should know that God destroys the guilty, not the innocent.

Then comes Bildad's first speech which basically has at its heart that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. These words were like salt on an open wound for Job.

The third friend, Zophar, in his first speech is harshest of all. Does Job think himself innocent? God is letting him down lightly. Job must acknowledge his sin so God can restore him.

Job is stung to sarcasm by the advice of his friends. He would rather make his case to God face to face than listen to them.

So, the arguments go back and forth between Job and his friends, who are hampered by their ignorance of the role of Satan in Job's pain and downfall, until we reach the section of the Book which we heard this morning. Here Job says that he is not listening to the advice of his friends, or his wife for that matter, he is standing his ground with God. His complaint is legitimate -God has no right to treat him like this – it isn't fair. If Job knew where to find God on earth, he would go to him and lay his complaint before him face to face. But at the same time, Job expresses fear of what it would be like to meet God face to face and complain. How would God respond?

The answer as to how God will respond we don't find out until Chapter 38 when God answers Job from the eye of a violent storm.

God tells Job to pull himself together and to stop talking without knowing what he is talking about. Up until now, Job has been questioning God. Now it is God's turn from chapter 38 onwards to question Job.

Even though Job's questions are not answered by God, Job is satisfied that God has responded to him.

But even at the end of the Book of Job we are left with the unanswered question of why do bad things happen to good people.

Our reading from the Gospel of Mark picks up on our theme of God blessing those who are rich for still, in the time of Jesus, this was the prevailing theology.

A man came running up to Jesus and threw himself at his feet. This man was a very pious man who wanted to know from Jesus whether he would inherit eternal life. He already knew the answer to his question for he had been following the Jewish law faithfully all of his life.

It was as if he was attempting to flatter Jesus in order to be praised by Jesus for his faithfulness to Jewish law.

Jesus quoted the commandments which were the basis for a respectable and decent life. "Wow" said the man, "From my youth I have kept them all."

Almost certainly the wealthy young man expected to be praised by Jesus in front of the crowd of people. Instead, Jesus said,

"Well, there is one thing more, go sell what you have and give it to the poor. Then come follow me for all your wealth will be in heaven." Jesus did not provide an answer to what the poor would do with the man's wealth.

The man left dejected for instead of being praised he had shown himself up in front of the crowd for being self-centred and conceited. His trust was not really in God. His trust for his future was in the wealth and the possessions he had. Jesus was essentially challenging him whether he trusted God more than his wealth and possessions.

Before we start offering criticism of the man take a look at how Jesus' disciples responded. They were astounded at Jesus reply to the man. You see, the disciples were also working on the popular Jewish presumption that to be wealthy and prosperous was the sign of a good man who was blessed and honoured by God. Wealth was a proof of excellence of character and favour of God.

What does this say to us today? What or whom do we trust for our future well-being?

Recently there have been many examples in the News media of followers of Jesus Christ and churches who have, for whatever reason, failed to live up to their high calling as disciples. On Sunday evening Hillsong church in Australia and the USA received bad press for its failure to take seriously complaints of sexual abuse and rape. The Anglican Church in Blenheim had a Priest defrocked for similar grooming of a distressed woman. The Catholic Church in France has numerous charges laid against Priests for sexual abuse.

Coming out of the American Pentecostal movement we have what is known as the Prosperity Gospel. The heart of this is that if you follow God then you will be blessed by God and as wealthy and rich as we are.

One of the key proponents of this Gospel in New Zealand is Bishop Brian Tamaki. I read recently that one of his parishioners gifted him a Tesla car worth over \$100,000. When questioned on the appropriateness of this gift, given the significant wealth of

Bishop Brian, Bishop Brian's response was that the person wished to honour him and it was a blessing of God.

In Stuff on Wednesday City Impact Church had the same charges levelled against it and its founder. Preaching of the prosperity gospel is rampant in churches throughout the world.

The question is whether we are really any different from the people of Job's day and that of Jesus' day.

Sometimes as a child I was told that we suffer here on earth to purify us for heaven. That made me think that if that was the case I didn't want to go to heaven.

Too often we want answers to the problem of pain, distress and misfortune, rather than living with the questions and asking where is God in my life in this? Asking, what is God saying to me?

One of the answers that people have come up with for our suffering is to say that our suffering is punishment from God (that is the Job's friends answer) and the other is to assume that life with God will never include suffering. That is the prosperity gospel answer of being blessed by God.

Either way we look at it suffering is a curse or lack of it is a blessing. But whose life has been devoid of suffering?

Job's friends for all of their best intentions did not address Job's suffering - they placed the blame on him. Even today some come up with the glib answers of Job's friends. When confronted with a life-threatening illness or great calamity in their life they are told, "You must have done something to deserve this punishment."

At the very moment when they most need hope and strength to face life they instead get a hefty dose of guilt laced with self-doubt. Still today there are many who feel that they are not worthy or good enough for God to love them.

I am thrilled that the author of Job took such care to record the rambling conversations of Job's friends for the Book serves as a permanent reminder that we have no right to stand beside a suffering person and say,

"Your suffering is the will of God. It is God punishing your sin."

Rather a quiet hand of support, a listening ear and a word of comfort letting them know that in Jesus Christ they are loved and understood as a beloved child of his – one for whom he died and rose again is much more in keeping with Christ and his ministry.

To God be the glory. Amen.