

Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

27 October 2024

Message – The Message of Job

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, may we share one another's burdens and joys. **Amen.**

For those who haven't gathered, I love the book of Job. The book challenges our ideas about God and about suffering and carries a strange, deeply mysterious, comfort within it.

This challenging reading of the book of Job is not the only possible reading. Yet, holding traditional conservative beliefs about God and suffering, we find a book that requires a myriad of explanations for its strangeness.

This conservative approach is the one most commentators take. Yet, there is no agreement on how to explain the many challenges. For example:

- Is the reason given for job's suffering ethical?
- Is it ethical that job is never told why he suffers?
- Why does the divine response never answer Job?
- Does the epilogue reaffirm the principle of retribution?

Conservative theologians sometimes recognise the need to answer these questions in the light of their beliefs. In part, I wonder if there is a basic belief about suffering and God that underpins how we read the book of Job.

If you believe that there is a reason for everything that happens in life, even if it is known only to God then you will largely side with Job's friends and want to search out the

reason for Job's suffering, which can't just be because God had something to prove!

If, on the other hand, you believe that there is suffering in life for which there is no good and loving reason, you will probably start to step into the ambiguity of Job, which is captured well in the climactic line of the poetry,

Therefore, I retract and repent in dust and ashes.

Some translations, including ours, insert an object in the sentence. Either Job's words or Job, giving us either *I retract my words* or *I abhor myself*. Given it is poetry, is it not more likely that the ambiguity is intentional.

The whole book has been set up, from a human perspective, as putting God on trial. Saying we retract a lawsuit does not mean we retract our words nor that we are ashamed of ourselves. It usually means, though we think we are in the right, we recognise that we cannot win the lawsuit. After all, who can argue against God!

I repent in dust and ashes is also ambiguous. The preposition translated *in* or *on* can also mean *concerning*. Job may be saying he is going to stop his little pity party and just get on with life. More darkly, we are made of *dust and ashes*, so he may even be repenting of life, given how badly his is going, it is human to think about ending it all.

The art of the poet is to take us on a journey. We have journeyed with Job and his friends and had an audience with God. God judges all that Job has said to be right and his friends to be in the wrong. Implicitly, in the framework that Job and his friends had, God has been found guilty. All that Job has said was right. No reason his friends gave for his

suffering was true. Job did not deserve his suffering.

The challenge is that our naïve view of creation is not God's view. Job is absolutely right, he did not deserve his suffering and, in the context of his life, it served no good or loving purpose, never mind the suffering of those around him.

The assumption Job and his friends have got wrong is that life is fair. If we all got what we deserved, for good or bad, would there be real freewill? Enlightened self-interest would require us to always do the good and loving thing, that we always loved God and loved our neighbours as ourselves.

The book of Job is blunt: Life is unfair. When it is over minor things we can ignore it. But when do the minor inequalities of life become real injustices. We all know that sometimes people are in the right place at the right time while at other time, people are in the wrong place at the wrong time through no design of their own.

God's response, that we cannot understand the design of creation seems profoundly unsatisfactory, yet it also points us in a new direction. We can no longer think of ourselves as in control, nor that life is just, nor that we understand. Instead, we are left to consider how we will respond to a world that is not always as we would hope.

Will we compound the injustices of life or will we strive to make life better for others? Christ left us in no doubt of God's answer to that question. Yet, the book of Job finishes in a way that seems at odds with what has gone before.

Job the righteous one gets everything back and more. While the rest of the book is in beautiful poetry, the prologue and the epilogue are in prose. Some scholars think they were

added by a different author. The simplicity of the prologue and epilogue are not all that it seems and there is hidden depth that draw us back to the poem.

Firstly, though God's response to Job starts with *'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?'* (38.2) In the epilogue God twice says to the friends *'you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.'* (42.7,8) While the friends have held onto the idea that we get what we deserve, both Job and the divine speeches reject this.

Secondly, God never tells Job what he thinks of him. We hope that his friends passed on why they are asking Job to pray for them but still Job does not learn that God knows him to be the most righteous of people. This reflects the reality of life, we at best only gain glimpses from others of how we are perceived.

Thirdly, the sacrifice demanded of the friends is huge, enough for the whole nation of Israel, again, poor translation misses the point that it is God who risks acting foolishly. And, what will calm God, the prayers of a righteous person, Job. Pray at all times, God listens.

Fourthly, Job still in a state of desolation, having not had his prayers answered in chapter one, and one would imagine having mixed feelings about his friends, prays for them. Love others, even if there is enmity. And, continue to pray. At no point does Job stop the conversation with God.

Fifthly, Job's fortunes are presumably not restored instantly, no miracle is indicated. When people return to visit him, they come with sympathy and to comfort for the past. Our suffering is not wiped away. It remains a part of us. What

we have lost, we will always have been lost. We can only receive comfort when we are open to the future. Job is blessed over his life but he does not know that as he embraces life again.

Sixthly, why does Job get double of everything? In the law, compensation for theft is double what has been stolen. The text is implying God has stolen from Job. Yahweh does not say it but actions speak louder than words.

Finally, why does Job live for another one-hundred and forty years? It is double the normal span of life; it is the double restoration of his first life. No, it doesn't restore Job's first family or his former servants and animals. But in the context, this is the greatest possible restitution.

This depth, hidden in plain sight, invites us to re-read the whole text with new vision. It is a difficult vision to embrace. In the class where Blythe and I studied this, it was only the two of us and the lecturer who felt that Job had won the trial. Others, mostly younger, could not embrace the very different view of God and suffering.

As we journey through life, if we choose the path of wisdom, and are open to the realities of life, our thinking develops and deepens. That is not to say that some of our earlier beliefs are unhelpful or totally wrong, only that they are only a part of the picture.

Job's friends express well how we wish the world was. Life teaches us that it is more complicated than that. Job and his book embrace that complexity, while also showing a person who continues to trust in God and talk to God.

May we all have the wisdom of Job.