

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield

11th of October, 2009

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

The lectionary this week gives us the second of four extracts from the *Book of Job*. For the past few months we've been reading wisdom literature, and *Job* fits into that genre, but as a type of anti-wisdom literature. We've seen that wisdom literature links obeying God with a prosperous life. *Job* tells the story of a man who does follow God's ways, and yet whose life is full of suffering.

Last week's reading began the story, telling us of the virtuous Job, the subject of a bet between God and Satan, who in this book is not the devil, but a member of God's court, an angel who exposes human wrongdoing. God boasted of Job's righteousness; Satan pointed out that Job had been rewarded for his righteousness in the appropriate, wisdom-literature way with wealth and family. So God told Satan: "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" Job's children were killed, his property was destroyed, and we're told: "Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'" Then, in the second part of last week's reading, God again boasted about Job, and Satan suggested that the ultimate test would be if Job himself was attacked. God allowed Satan to do what he liked, and Satan gave Job loathsome sores. Job sat among the ashes scraping himself, and his wife said to him: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But Job responded: "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" and we were told that "in all this Job did not sin with his lips." That was last week's reading.

In this week's reading, we find that things have changed. The Job who worshipped the Lord and did not sin with his lips is now mourning the absence of God: "Today also my complaint is bitter; [God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning." What has happened between the Job who told his wife that they should accept the bad at God's hands; and the Job who now wants to find God and argue with him?

Job was visited by three friends, who came to console him. They tore their robes, they threw dust upon their heads, they sat down in the ground with him and remained silent with him. After seven days, Job began to speak, cursing the day he was born. Job knows that he is innocent. He knows that he doesn't deserve his suffering. And we know that, too, because we've heard the conversation between God and Satan. We know that Job is right; he *doesn't* deserve what's happened to him. But Job's friends can't cope with this. They believe that God treats people as they deserve. So if Job is suffering, he must deserve it. And they try to get him to accept this.

The first friend, Eliphaz, asks Job rhetorically: "Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?" It would seem to be a reasonable question; we know that we all sin, and that none of us are perfect - except that in this case we also know that Job *is* righteous before God. God said so. Eliphaz then suggests that suffering can be a growth experience: "How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty." He's basically saying that these things are sent to try us, which is still one of the ways that people try to explain suffering.

The next friend, Bildad, suggests that Job's children died because they were sinners, and tells Job to repent and seek God: "if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore to you your rightful place." And the last friend, Zophar is sure that it is Job's own sin that has brought all this on him: "For you say, 'My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight.' But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." Zophar argues that Job may not know how he has sinned, but he has.

All the way through the conversation Job maintains his innocence. His friends tell him over and over again, following the “wisdom” of wisdom literature, that God is a God of justice and that Job’s suffering is either deserved or that in some way it’s good, it will teach Job his faults, or test him. But Job knows that this isn’t true. The friends argue on the basis of common sense, tradition, rationality and religious revelation. All Job has to answer this is his own experience; that he is a righteous man whose suffering is undeserved. But he holds on to that, he maintains his integrity. This infuriates his friends; Eliphaz ends up saying to Job: “Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities.” This is a long way from the beginning, when the friends sat with Job in silence for seven days. If Job would just admit that he was a sinner, no doubt they would continue to be full of sympathy. But Job maintains his innocence and his friends are infuriated. On the other hand, Job began by wishing for death, but as his friends argue with him he starts to defend himself and reaches the point in which we find him in today’s reading - demanding that God answer for all his suffering.

As we’ll see next week, God does answer Job – in a way. There could be an easy answer, God could tell Job about the bet with Satan, but he doesn’t. Job never receives an answer to his questions; why do the righteous suffer, why do the wicked seem to escape punishment. What happens instead is an experience with the living God, as God finally speaks to Job out of the whirlwind

But in today’s reading God seems far away. Job parodies Psalm 139 in his complaint. The psalmist writes: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

But Job complains: “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.”

The lectionary links Job’s complaint with Psalm 22, which also mourns the absence of God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” This is the Psalm that, according to Mark, Jesus quoted on the cross. Both Job and today’s psalmist have experienced the absence of God that Jesus himself experienced in the crucifixion. One of our answers to questions about suffering that Job asks is to remember that in Jesus God suffers in solidarity with humanity.

When God finally speaks to Job he condemns Job’s friends for their words. Job’s friends try to justify God to Job; they seem to feel the need to defend God against Job’s accusations. That’s not an unusual response. If we believe that God is good and just, then it’s natural to try and make sense of things around us in the way that supports that. We’re not usually so crude as to suggest that people bring misfortune on themselves. But we might agree with Eliphaz that an experience of suffering will give people strength. Or we might agree with Zophar that since we’re all sinners in one way or another, however God punishes humanity is less than we deserve. We might think that the faithful response to distress is Job’s first response: “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”. But the *Book of Job* suggests that there are other faithful ways of responding to suffering, and they include Job’s complaints, arguments, demands that God answer him and justifications of his own integrity. At the end of the book it is the impatient Job who is upheld by God and Job’s pious friends who are condemned.

In the *Book of Job* we see an intra-biblical argument. There *are* parts of the Bible that argue that God’s justice means that the good are rewarded and the wicked punished. The *Book of Job* is a rebuttal of this. The Bible is not a simple book; it’s a collection that recognises the complexity of life. The *Book of Job* doesn’t answer that most difficult of questions: why, if God is good, do humans suffer unjustly. What it does do is warn us against easy answers and against trying to defend God in ways that condemn people.