

## Sermon for Mount Macedon and Riddells Creek

4<sup>th</sup> of October, 2009

### Job 1:1, 2:1-10

This has been a shocking week in our region. Last Saturday, tropical storm Ketsana flooded Manila and the surrounding area, killing almost 300 people in the Philippines. While the Philippines was the worst hit, almost 100 people were killed in Vietnam, and according to the Red Cross 16 people are dead and 135 are missing in Laos, and 14 people are dead in Cambodia.

Then on Wednesday morning a tsunami hit Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga. It's thought that up to 190 people died and thousands have been injured and are homeless. Later that day an earthquake struck Sumatra in Indonesia. While many people are still missing, the United Nations estimates that 1100 people have been killed. We've been reminded, as we were with the bushfires last summer, just how dangerous the world can be, and how precious and precarious life is.

The lectionary this week gives us an extract from the *Book of Job*. I've found that as I've read the newspapers and listened to the radio, that my reading of *Job* has resonated with what I've been seeing and hearing. At one level, the level of tectonic plates and earthquakes and poorly constructed buildings, we know exactly why this week's disasters happened. At another level, believing in a good God who loves us, we are faced with the question that Job asks – why do the innocent suffer. The *Book of Job* warns us not to try and answer this question too quickly or easily.

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.

Today's reading comes from the very beginning of the book. It starts by telling us that: "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." Job is so righteous that God boasts about him to Satan, who in this book is not the devil, but a member of God's court, an angel who exposes human wrongdoing. As Satan points out, Job has been rewarded for his righteousness in the appropriate, wisdom-literature way. He's wealthy, and respected, the father of seven sons and three daughters. Take this away, Satan tells God, and Job will no longer be so righteous. God takes up the challenge, and tells Satan: "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So Job's children are killed, his property is 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 we come to the next part of today's reading, where God again boasts about Job, and Satan suggests that the ultimate test will be if Job himself is attacked: "stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face". So God allows Satan to do what he likes, and Satan gives Job loathsome sores. Job sits among the ashes scraping himself, and his wife says to him: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But Job responds: "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're told that "in all this Job did not sin with his lips." There today's reading ends.

Job's wife is sometimes given a hard time for her advice to her husband, and Job's response to her is impatient and condemnatory. But she's the one who recognises first what's going on. She sees the conflict between Job's integrity and God's goodness that Job himself is going to struggle with for the rest of the book.

Job has three friends, who come to console him. They tear their robes, they throw dust upon their heads, they sit down in the ground with him and remain silent with him.

After seven days, Job begins to speak, and he sounds a lot like his wife. He doesn't curse God, but he does curse 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 demands that God answer for all his suffering. As we'll see over the next few weeks, God does answer Job - in a way. God never actually explains why the righteous suffer.

One of the things that God does do when he finally speaks to Job is condemn 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. As we'll see over the next few weeks, 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.

This week we've seen people in our region suffer in ways they could never deserve. There are people who, like Job, have lost many members of their family and everything they owned. We're like the friends of Job, not personally affected, but wishing to console and help. We can offer our help through the appeals that have been launched. We can also imitate the compassion and sympathy of Job's friends in their very first response, when they sit silently with him in the dirt for seven days. The *Book of Job* suggests that it's this type of compassion, rather than trying to justify the ways of God, that is our most faithful response to other people's suffering.

Let's end with the prayer the Moderator has written for Uniting churches to say:

Living and Loving God,  
We pray for our brothers and sisters affected by natural disasters in the Philippines, Samoa,  
Indonesia and nearby countries.  
Give strength to those involved in rescue and relief efforts,  
comfort to those who mourn,  
help and healing to the injured and homeless  
and a spirit of generosity to your church.  
In the midst of heartache, confusion and desolation  
may your Holy Spirit bring courage and peace.  
In the name of Christ we pray.  
Amen.