

Pentecost 19

Job 1: 1; 2: 1-10 Psalm 26 Hebrews: 1: 1-4; 2: 5-12 Mark 10: 2-16

A feature of the first four Sundays of October in Year B of the lectionary, Pentecost 19-22, is a focus on the book of Job. Or at least a shorthand version of this book, which is perhaps one of the most challenging and theologically sophisticated of the Old Testament.

I say a shorthand version as there are readings from the beginning, middle, and the end of Job which provide just a short synopsis of the book which actually has 42 chapters.

Today Job is introduced as a “blameless and upright man”, extremely pious, who loves God and his family. We discover how he ends up in this mess as he does (2: 1-10). Next Sunday’s reading will focus on his “bitter complaint” or lament to and perhaps also against God (23: 1-9, 16-17). On the third Sunday of the month we will hear some of God’s response (38: 1-7); and finally we will get to read about Job’s restoration to health, wealth, family, and importantly, right relationship with God (42: 1-6, 10-17).

What is missing from this brief excursion through Job is his dialogue with his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, which actually forms the bulk of the text, 35 chapters in all.

Along with Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Job is one of the four books of Wisdom in the OT that grapple with what it means to be human. As the first really poetic book of the English Bible, Job introduces us to Hebrew poetry, which is distinctive for its combination and repetition of ideas rather than sounds, with which we are perhaps more familiar.

The author, date, and place of the Book of Job are all uncertain but judging by the style of the Hebrew it uses, some scholars estimate Job to be the oldest book of the Old Testament. That it is ancient seems to be generally agreed. As a result, it is important to note that the book of Job should be read as parable, not as history. By way of illustration, Uz, for example is not mentioned as a place anywhere else in the Bible.

This is particularly useful as many modern readers struggle right from the outset with the character called "*the satan*", translated simply as Satan. After introducing Job, today's text jumps to the start of Chapter 2 and repeats a scene from Chapter 1, a picture of the monarch and courtiers in the divine court, a common image in the OT, God and angels.

Although the term "*Satan*" has come to carry all kinds of negative connotations and possibly baggage for us, "*the satan*" in Hebrew is not so much a name as it is an office or function, simply the adversary, or the accuser, something like the prosecuting attorney. It is a descriptive noun, describing any person who stands opposed to someone else.

This character claims that Job is only pious because God has blessed him richly with good health, a large family and extensive wealth. So a wager unfolds between the accused and God, that Job will abandon his faith if all those blessings are removed. The Message has this dialogue between *the satan* and God in Chapter 1:

"But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He'd curse you right to your face that's what."

God replied: "We'll see. Go ahead – do what you want with all that is his just don't hurt *him*."

And so Job loses his children and all his wealth, but keeps his faith, finally stating:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
naked I'll return to the womb of the earth.

God gives, God takes.

God's name be ever blessed." (1: 21)

Chapter 2, which we heard today, repeats the scene from Chapter 1, with God saying "You see, I told you so, Job persists in his integrity!" So the accuser counters by wagering that if Job also loses his health, then "He'd curse you to your face..."

And so Job ends up where we find him, sitting on an ash heap, scraping at the sores all over his body with a piece of broken pottery.



Although he is able to hang onto his faith in God, Job's wife isn't so sure, as The Message has it, Job's wife says:

"Still holding on to your precious integrity are you? Curse God and be done with it!"

He told her: “You’re talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God – why not also the bad days?” Not once through all this did Job sin. He said nothing against God. (2: 9-10)

Exactly what Job’s wife means by her question is open to interpretation, however she too has lost her children and her wealth, so we should resist the temptation to judge too harshly.

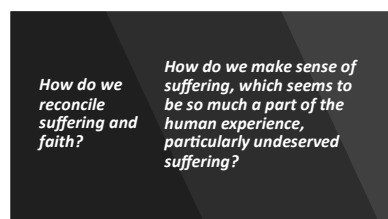
Perhaps she means that any God who would do such things, or allow such things, is not worth the integrity of relationship. Perhaps, like Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, she is trying somehow to find reason to lay the blame on Job, which would undermine his integrity.



However we understand her comments, she seems to be asking an important question:

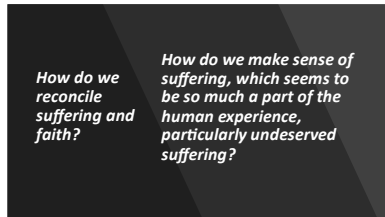
How do we reconcile suffering and faith?

This is the kernel of a broader question: *How do we make sense of suffering, which seems to be so much a part of the human experience, particularly undeserved suffering?*



That is where we will leave Job for today, sitting among the ashes pondering these questions, and where I am going to leave you.

In two Sundays' time, October 17, Pentecost 21, the third and penultimate Sunday of the four-week cycle of readings from Job, I will come back to this story.



References

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