

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

TOUGH CHALLENGES

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Job 23

Mark 10:17-31

What do you do when you feel that God has abandoned you?

Last week we thought about the beginning of the story of Job, and we left Job determined to keep the integrity of his faith no matter what disaster came upon him. His wife told him to curse God and die, but he refused. God had given him good things, but they were God's gift, or loan, and he had every right to take them away. Job would still bless and worship God. In the intervening chapters between that great determination to have faith and what we read today, where Job is in despair and feels that God has abandoned him, there is not a lot of action, but a lot of talk. Job's three "comforters" Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad (the Shuhite, the shortest man in the Bible) have come to console with him. Because religious conventions of their day assured them so, each of them is convinced that Job must have one something wrong for God to punish him so dreadfully. Life would not be fair, God would not be fair if ill fortune was not tied to behaviour. And so they reason and argue with Job. And Job defends himself, he will not confess to wickedness which he has not committed. He also defends God, that God must be fair and just, but he doesn't understand why this suffering has come to him. And although nothing happens in terms of physical movement, a lot happens in terms of what is going on in Job's heart. His friends, far from comforting him, are draining his strength and his faith from him, with their well-meant platitudes and formulaic faith. And so this morning we read this outburst from Job.

He wishes he knew where to find God. He feels God is absent from him. If only he could find him, he would be able to discover what was going on. Job still does not turn from God, or turn against him, he believes that he is being tested but he is in despair about how much more might be asked of him, or done to him. He still believes in God and believes that he will be vindicated, but now he is afraid of God, afraid of what might happen next, of whether he can take much more.

One of the wonderful things about what is known as the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is that in places it can really show us the questions that so many people wrestle with every day. This wisdom literature includes the Psalms, the Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes and, of course, Job. Some very different forms of literature and some very different outlooks are contained in these books. The Proverbs in particular give the conventional, cause and effect view of faith and life. But the Psalms show the depths of the human heart in joy and despair, while Ecclesiastes shows us that sometimes life can seem to be meaningless. And Job shows us what it is to ask and ask questions of God and not find any answer. And it is hard. The formulae of faith have no answer to the deepest questions and howls of agony which life can force from the human heart.

Job's friends knew only what their catechism had taught them, that evil must follow wrongdoing, there must be cause and effect. And their insistence on this at a basic level only made Job's questions and his suffering worse. With friends like these, who needs enemies? Though we shouldn't be too hard on them perhaps. At least they did keep Job company in his distress. When he lost all he had they didn't run away, as fair weather friends might. In fact they reacted as most people would: they wanted to help. The problem was that there was no way that any words of theirs could help, certainly their conventional wisdom could not cope with Job's situation, and so they inadvertently made things worse.

In fact, their wisdom is not so far wide of the mark. There is a cause and effect to Job's suffering, and the readers and hearers of the story know it. The introduction to the story, which shows us the Satan seeking to prove a point against God, gives us that context, but the cause of Job's sufferings is not one which he or his friends could possibly ever know, and certainly is not on the level of personal cause leading to personal effect.

The church so often has been in the position of Job's comforters. Too often we find it very hard to listen to the real questions and pain and agony of humanity or of individuals, and we retreat from the answer-less questions into the formulae of faith. We find it too hard to sit in solidarity and silence with those whose suffering and pain is undeniable but unanswerable. And when we retreat from that silence into too ready speech we do very little good and indeed can do immeasurable damage. We have to be prepared to listen, to listen to other people and to listen to the questions and pain in our own hearts that we sometimes use faith to stifle. Faith that is used to turn away from the questions is not a faith that can be helpful to ourselves or to others, that can change lives and change the world.

The challenge to Job was to maintain faith in the face of great loss and personal suffering. The challenge Jesus gave to the rich young man, and to many more who were listening, was to give up what he had voluntarily. Which do you think would be harder? Is it worse to have bad things happen to you, which you don't understand and over which you have no control, but which are not your fault? Or is it worse to have to choose to give up what makes life comfortable, what gives you pleasure and satisfaction, and know that it is your own choice and when you feel the lack of what you have given away to know you only have yourself to blame? They are not the same challenge, but they are related.

Jesus knew the lure of things, the lust of possession. In his day people did not strive for the latest smartphone or fast car or computer gaming system or luxurious holiday as often we do. But they still wanted a nice house, or maybe a racing camel! They wanted whatever spoke of luxury and ease, just as we do now. But if we also want to inherit eternal life as the rich young man did, then there are choices to make. We can't add eternal life, to our Christmas wish list (although actually Christmas is all about God giving us the gift of eternal life, in Jesus!). It has to be the first thing that we seek after. God has to be the first thing that we look for. In fact God has to be the only thing that we look for, that is on our wish list. When we put him first like that anything else which God gives us is seen just as that, as a gift, which is the healthiest way to look on any blessings or possessions with which we have been entrusted. They are a gift, a loan, not a right or a status marker.

The challenge to the rich man is hard for us to hear. We don't like it. We know that even the poorest of us just is not poor compared to the way that half of the world's population think of poverty. The despair of Job is also hard for us to hear. It reminds us of times when we too have felt God distant and wondered what he had in mind for us. It reminds us of the times our families or friends have asked where we think God is in this or that situation. It is hard for us to hear these questions, to face these realities which are part of the human condition.

On the other hand, the book of Job, with all its questions and its pain has been one which has helped many people find a way to continue through the labyrinth of faith in difficult times. With imagination, the Book of Job has been used by Jewish scholars to reflect on the Shoah, the Holocaust. The unmerited suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazi regime was a re-living of the myth of Job. On one hand, the people wished they had never been born while, on the other, it brought to the fore God's commitment to them, present with them in their suffering.

Southern Africans living with HIV/AIDS drew upon the narrative of Job when their friends, their comforters, other Christians, the Church, told them that their suffering was a punishment sent by God. The Liberation Theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, used the Book of Job to speak of God from the crippling effects of chronic poverty and state oppression. In each case, affirming the presence of the Holy in the midst of the most gruelling suffering was never an easy road; it is an experience or encounter with the Sacred which is hard won.

It is hard won but it has been won for us through Jesus. Jesus has never asked anything of us which he was not first of all prepared to undergo himself. He asked his disciples to give up home and family, but he also gave up these things along with them, before them. When he calls on us to put God first, to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, he is only calling us to what he did himself. And when we feel the despair of Job, when we or others are facing the deepest despairing questions of life, questions raised by our own sufferings or the suffering and injustices of the world, we should remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane asking that God take away his cup of suffering. We should remember Jesus on the cross, demanding of God why he had forsaken him. There is nothing that comes our way, nothing that is asked of us which Jesus has not also known. And so however deep the questions go, they cannot go deeper than the love of God which will hold us in our pain and surround us in our questions, and bring us his life eternal as we in honesty seek after him. Amen.