

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 6th October 2024, Pentecost 20

Readings: **Job 1:1 2:1-10**

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Psalm 26

Mark 10:2-16

It's amazing how often bible readings, written long ago, speak to the things going on in our lives and in the life of the world. I'm not saying all readings, but usually there is something on a Sunday that clearly resonates! It may not be the whole of the reading - it might be just a verse, or a couple of verses, or even a word! It's like God's Spirit is giving a nudge saying, 'There's something here for you!' It may be immediately apparent, or it may take some chewing over.

I think there is particular gift in the story of Job because there is so much suffering in the world and we're reminded of this each time we watch the news. According to Lebanon's Health Ministry more than 1400 Lebanese people have been killed by Israel's attacks since I wrote last week. Of those who have been killed 127 were children, and 261 were women. On Tuesday evening Iran fired about 180 ballistic missiles at Israel most which were neutralised by Israeli or US air-defence systems.

The photos and video footage of people broken and crying, hospitals and neighbourhoods destroyed is heart breaking; and the spiralling conflict that now includes Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran and the US... is hard to understand. How can God's Shalom, God's Salaam, and God's peace be made real for the communities and peoples of the Middle East?

The book of Job explores the complex issues of suffering, doubt, faith, and blessing... and it offers us an opportunity to reflect upon these elements of life experience. I think we've all asked the question, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' Certainly, it was a thoughtful question asked each year by Grade Seven students when I was teaching Religious Education in Rockhampton.

Some people are not able to believe in a good and loving God, when that same God has not intervened to prevent genocides and ongoing injustice. They may have hoped for divine intervention and in response to that articulated hope, I

wonder if we can consider the incarnation of Jesus as a divine intervention? Somehow, God becoming human in the person of Jesus and through him God giving a vision to humanity of how things could be better. For that same Jesus said, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?' . He did not say, 'Destroy your enemies and wipe them from the face of the earth!' Jesus is remembered saying, 'Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit those in prison.' He did not say, 'Walk on by when you see suffering because that is someone else's responsibility to care about that!' And Jesus is remembered to have said, 'I am with you always!' He did not say, 'Good luck! I'll see you later when things have really gone down the gurgler!'

The Book of Job begins with the description of a man called Job who, we are told, was blameless and upright. A man who feared God and who chose not to do evil. A man who was married and had seven sons and three daughters. A man who was wealthy and had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred oxen, five hundred donkeys, and many servants. A man considered great by his community.

In the story, there is an imagined dialogue between Satan and God, in which Satan suggests that Job is only faithful because everything in his life is going well. He proposes that if Job lost some, or all, of the good things then he would become unfaithful. In that imagined dialogue God gave permission for Satan to do whatever he liked to Job, except take his life...

That permission from God to create suffering is a very uncomfortable element in the story, and something to wrestle with... for almost immediately we are told that Job's life was torn apart. His children and servants were killed; his oxen, camels and donkeys were stolen; his sheep were killed... and he was afflicted with loathsome sores. His ten children: seven sons and three daughters were killed... I imagine indescribable grief.

In response, we are told that Job sat in the ashes of an old fire and scraped his sores with a broken piece of pottery! It is possible that here and in his ongoing response we find the origin of the phrase 'the patience of Job'. But, there was no patience from Job's angry and heart-broken wife who chastised her husband

with a bitter question, 'Do you still persist in your integrity?' Before suggesting that he should 'Curse God and die!'

I think most of us can relate to Job's wife, who is disappointingly not named, for she has lost everything and seems to have been inconsolable. I think some of us have lost all or some of what's important to us, so in some ways she speaks on our behalf. Consequently, we might consider Job's response as something not only offered to his wife but also to us. Do we just have faith in God when things are going well, and then put our faith on shelf when the wheels fall off? Or, does our faith in God persist... no matter how difficult and tragic our life's circumstance?

In the story, God is described as being distant and disengaged. There are no words of comfort for Job... no visions, or angels in the night. Just the taste of ashes, and the pain of sores. But, I think as Christians we inevitably read this through a post-incarnation lense. **Is it too much to suggest that God is sitting in the ashes beside every contemporary Job, helping them scrape their sores?** Whether in Gaza, Lebanon or Israel; whether in Ukraine or Sudan...

Surely, there is a gift in remembering that Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died; that Jesus responded with compassion to human need; that Jesus was betrayed and tortured; and that at the end of his life Jesus experienced his own sense of being abandoned well expressed in the words remembered in Matthew's Gospel: '*Eloi! Eloi! Lama sabachthani!*' (Matthew 27:46). These Aramaic words mean, 'My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?'

Yes, there was later resurrection and new life for Job and for Jesus – and in this there is the hope and promise that God transforms what we think to be endings, into new beginnings. But, before that happens, there is the comfort of a God who shares our sufferings, gives us strength to keep going, and who weeps with us when it's just too hard.

I wonder what part of Job's story resonates with you this week? Can you identify most strongly with him at the beginning when everything was going well... or, are you sitting in your own version of ashes and sores? Are you with Job's wife... angry, bitter, or heart-broken? Or, are you – like Job - resolved to keep the faith no matter what?

Whatever your life's circumstance, or mine, may we know God's blessing!

Please join me as I close in prayer:

Loving God we give thanks for your gifts of life and love, and for the gentle reminder that you are present with us no matter what is going on.

We lift to you the escalating conflict in the Middle East and pray for the miracle of peace. We ask your blessing on all who grieve; on all who have been injured; and on all who care for the injured and displaced. We lift to you all who have authority in this region and pray for them wisdom about how best to bring about peace.

In our own living we give thanks for the things which give us joy and ask for patience and wisdom with the things that trouble us.

We pray in the name of the one who shows us the way,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.