

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 3 OCTOBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom), then adapted for use with the Strathfield-Homebush congregation (also by Zoom). The Lectionary takes us this week, and for the next few weeks, to the book of Job. Job's a difficult book, and one which really needs to be read from beginning to end, lest selected pericopes be understood out of the unified context of the whole. So today we begin, with the commitment that we'll continue with the Lectionary to avoid that trap.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Loving God,
were we to search the universe, there is none like you.
You are great beyond all greatness,
majestic beyond all majesty,
powerful beyond all notions of power.
And you alone are holy;
no other being and no other thing may lay claim to holiness,
which belongs only to you.
You are the very creator of all that is,
of the countless galaxies of infinite stars,
of this special earth which you have given us as a home,
of all life that is,
in its infinite varieties and sizes,
ever changing, ever vibrant.
Yet, Father, you choose to be present among *us*;
you look on *us*, in all our unworthiness,
with compassion and love.
Your inexplicable grace and generosity simply take our breath away.
You are a great and wonderful God indeed,
and we exalt you, and worship you and adore you.

Our Father,
We acknowledge before you, and each other, and ourselves,
that we are unworthy of your love, and grace and generosity.
We are sinful people, mired in lives that are unworthy of our high calling.
Our worship is often half-hearted and distracted,
our prayers mere lip service,
and our penitence transitory and quickly forgotten.
Forgive us, we pray, for our sins of commission, and our sins of omission,
for our faltering faith and equivocal discipleship,
for our cold hearts and mechanical worship,
for our conditional loving and begrudging forgiveness.
Equip us and strengthen us to be the people you would have us be,
and fill us with your Holy Spirit to guide and protect us.
For we ask these things in the holy name of Jesus Christ.
Amen

2 Declaration of Forgiveness.

In his letter to the church in Rome,
Paul reminded his readers of what Jesus had done for us:

*Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people,
so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.
For just as through the disobedience of the one man
the many were made sinners,
so also through the obedience of the one man
the many will be made righteous.*
Through the sacrificial obedience of Jesus Christ,
our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Reading –**
Job 1:1, 2:1-10

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

(Our various Governments have been under enormous pressure over the last couple of years. Coping with the pandemic has been a constant challenge for both Federal and State Governments, as they have sought to strike a balance between community safety and normal freedoms, and at the same time to preserve the economy. In recent weeks, the Federal Government has been involved in a major diplomatic undertaking around defence and national security. We all have our own views of these things, but we would not doubt the good intentions or the hard work of those facing such challenging problems. So our prayers today are for our Governments.)

Heavenly Father,
We come to you today to pray for our leaders in the various tiers of government.
We are blessed to be a democracy,
and celebrate our right to have an opinion, and to have a say in our affairs;
and it is part of who we are that we will often disagree with each other.
But whoever our leaders are,
we understand that they are charged with onerous responsibilities,
and that they have taken on very demanding jobs.
They face difficult choices, when often there are no obvious answers.
They must allocate limited resources and determine priorities,
when every area of need has merit and a constituency ready to argue its case.
They are in the public limelight almost constantly,
ever under the scrutiny of a 24/7 press, hungry for the next story,
and heavily restricted in the time that they can call their own,
or share with their loved ones.
So we pray for them all today,
no matter to what political party or faction they belong,
no matter whether we agree with their decisions or not,
no matter whether we voted for them or not.
We pray for them because they are human beings,
doing their best in very difficult jobs;
human beings who do and will always make mistakes,
but unlike the rest of us, their mistakes are always there in the public domain.
We pray for our Federal leaders,
our Prime Minister, Scott Morrison,
the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg,
and the Health Minister, Greg Hunt,

all charged with particularly onerous responsibilities during this time of pandemic;
 and for the other senior ministers facing especial pressure at the moment –
 the Defence Minister, Peter Dutton, and Foreign Affairs Minister, Marise Payne.
 We pray for those who lead the Federal Opposition,
 Anthony Albanese, Richard Marles and Penny Wong,
 and the other senior members of the Opposition front bench.
 Be with them all, we pray;
 give them wisdom, energy and integrity,
 and may all they do be in the interests of the nation and its people,
 and not just for their party's or their own political benefit.
 We pray too for all the state Premiers and Chief Ministers,
 for Gladys Berejiklian here in NSW,
 but also for her colleagues in other states,
 for Anastacia Palaszczuk, Daniel Andrews and Peter Gutwein,
 for Steven Marshall and Mark McGowan,
 and for Andrew Barr and Michael Gunner;
 for the ministers who serve in all those jurisdictions,
 and for the leaders of the respective oppositions.
 May they find the balance between parochialism
 and the broader national interest,
 and may they find productive ways of co-operating with each other,
 and with the Commonwealth.
 Father, we pray too for leaders at local level – mayors and council members,
 whose responsibility is to their immediate communities,
 usually with inadequate resources,
 and yet who are also expected to be part of the wider programs
 of both State and Federal governments.
 Father, we pray your blessing on all these women and men,
 particularly at this time of national crisis in the context of a worldwide crisis.

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

Our father in heaven,
 Hallowed be your name.
 Your kingdom come;
 Your will be done
 on earth as in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread,
 and forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those who sin against us.
 Save us from the time of trial
 and deliver us from evil,
 for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
 now and forever.
 Amen

6 **Blessing and Dismissal**

Life can be complex and life can be hard,
 but life is our precious gift from God.
 So go now to embrace life as you find it,
 and as it finds you,
 knowing that, whatever the circumstances,

the one steadfast thing in this life is God.
The blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you now,
and remain with you evermore.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

When I was much younger, like many young Christians, I was very keen to know “the answer” to the difficult situations that life throws up. Not that, at that stage, I had any but the most theoretical experience of how tough life can be. But, even in my naïve and sheltered world, it was obvious that bad stuff happens to apparently innocent people. In the neighbourhood, someone’s house burns down, or someone you know is assaulted and robbed, or a new-born baby dies. In the wider world, cities are devastated by earthquakes or other natural disasters; wars are fought, leading to the death or suffering of both combatants and civilians; whole nations find themselves subjected to tyrannical and oppressive régimes. I was twenty-one when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, and visited a genocide on their own people, costing millions of lives. The newspapers told me that horrendous stuff like that happens, and happens all too frequently, for reasons that appear completely random and unfair, or even for no apparent reason at all. How can we make sense of such apparently undeserved, random suffering?

There were a lot of people of faith who had a ready and simple answer to offer. All these things happen because we live in a “fallen world”, a world gone wrong because of human sin. Suffering is a result of human sinfulness. They would point to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: the world was perfect, until the two of them sinned by disobeying God. At that time, the text tells us, death entered the world, and humankind was cursed to live a hard and dangerous life. Soon afterwards the first murder was committed: sin had begun its vice-like grip on the world.

Then these same people would point to passages like Psalm 1 – but there are lots of others – asserting that God always punishes sinners, but that he causes the virtuous to prosper.

*... the wicked will not stand in the judgement, [writes the psalmist],
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

For a young person, trying to make sense of the world, and looking for the sort of black and white answers that immaturity craves, all this seemed logical enough. The implication was clear – people who suffer are sinners; their suffering is the fault both of their own sinfulness, and of the fallen world they’ve inherited. It’s God’s perfect justice in action; and that seemed quite satisfying to a naïve and immature young man. It’s easy to be coldly logical when you’re young and have little life experience. And, as humans, we do *love* to *blame* someone when bad stuff happens, and we *love* to think that what happens is fair and just. It all makes the world seem a little more benign, a little more explainable, a bit less dangerous, and a lot less random and frightening.

But of course the world is *not* like that, and as young people become adults, they begin to experience some of the complexities, the hardships and the injustices that are part and parcel of human existence. For me, those glib explanations by some people of faith made less and less sense, and proved less and less adequate in bringing any sense of logic, let alone any sense of fairness, to the sometimes brutal world of reality.

I think the absolute bankruptcy of that simple “It’s all because of sin” explanation was, for me, made irredeemably obvious at the time of the Asian tsunami in 2004. A tsunami that arose in the Pacific swept over a number of south-east and south Asian nations, indiscriminately killing well over two hundred thousand people. At the time, a prominent Sydney cleric pronounced that it had been God’s judgment on the “flesh-pots of Asia” – because the tsunami had devastated a number of seaside holiday resorts. But if it was all about the sin of those who had died, then why were so many innocent Asian people, who had nothing to do with the holiday trade, caught up in the destruction? If it was all about the sin of those who had died, why didn’t the tsunami strike the

wealthy nations from which most of the tourists came? How could God's judgment be visited so indiscriminately and unfairly on the innocent and the sinful alike? It simply didn't add up, nor could it in any way be described as "just".

This week and for the next three weeks, the Lectionary takes us to the book of Job. Job is a piece of wisdom literature, found in the "Other Writings" section of the Hebrew Bible. It's a work of fiction, and like a great deal of good fiction, it probes deeply into the most profound questions of human existence. And it addresses just the issue that I've been talking about: why do terrible things happen to good people.

We should give thanks that those who regard Job as a factual account of actual events are wrong. As God is portrayed in Job, he enters a wager with one of the other characters, permitting Job not only to lose everything that he has, but also to suffer horrendously, physically and spiritually. Job becomes a plaything in a divine game of one-upmanship. None of us could, or should, believe in a God who would act in such a cavalier manner. No, Job *is* a work of fiction, written to explore apparently indiscriminate human suffering; and it achieves that purpose very powerfully.

From its very outset, Job is written to rebut the idea that humans suffer because of their sinfulness. Before we have any idea what terrible things await poor Job, the author tells us very clearly that he is *not* a sinful man:

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's blamelessness is affirmed by God several times later in the book. In fact his blamelessness is the very foundation on which the whole book rests.

In our reading, we meet someone called "Satan". That is very misleading in English translations; it conjures up all sorts of images of some horned demon who embodies evil, and who is God's arch-enemy. The Hebrew word actually means "adversary", and it has a "the" in front of it. What is misleadingly translated as "Satan" should read "the Adversary"; and the Adversary (or Accuser) is represented almost as a kind of member of God's "staff". This is part of the fictional heaven that the writer creates to form the basis for his story. God looks benignly and approvingly on Job, pleased with his uprightness; while one of his staff seems to have the cynical task of correcting God's naivety.

So the drama begins. The Lectionary passes over most of chapter 1. There we learn that Job is a very wealthy man, with a prosperous family and thousands of livestock. It's Job's wealth that the Adversary cottons onto. Surely, he tells God, Job only fears you because his life is so prosperous. Take away all his prosperity, and just you see: Job will curse you.

.... stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.

The cynical Adversary is accusing God of being naïve and gullible; Job's faith needs to be tested in the fire of suffering – and he's quite sure it will collapse under pressure. Okay, you're on, says God, at once expressing deep faith in Job, but at the same time agreeing to Job being very severely tested. The upshot is that the upright Job, whom God has affirmed to be blameless, is to be made to suffer for no reason that could in any way be called fair or just. Not only is all his property taken away from him, but his seven sons and three daughters are all killed. The Adversary applies a terrible test to Job's faithfulness to God.

And that is what the book of Job is about. The dominant idea in Israel was that suffering was

retributive justice, visited upon people because of their sinfulness. The final redaction of Job probably dates from the time of the Babylonian exile, or the period immediately afterwards, when Jews of the diaspora often found themselves unwelcome in the wider world. According to the prophets, the Jews' suffering – the collapse of Judah, the captivity, and the Jews' dispersal – was all the result of their sinfulness. Jeremiah, in particular, is adamant that all this suffering was the direct result of God's justice, visited on his errant and faithless people. It's the same paradigm we began with, the facile explanation for suffering that has wide currency among some Christians.

But, says Job, it's not true. Retributive justice does not, cannot, explain all suffering. Bad things do happen to good people. Job, acknowledged to be blameless by God himself, suffers terribly. Indeed in chapter 2, which is part of our reading, the situation becomes even more stark. The Adversary ups the ante. Job has *not* cursed God, despite the terrible loss of his children and all his property. God is made to tell the Adversary,

There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.

But, says the Adversary, he *will* curse you if he thinks it will save his life. You're on, says God again. Don't kill him, but you can do everything but. He's in your power.

So [the Adversary] went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Once again, the innocent Job is unfairly, undeservedly inflicted with gross suffering. Once again, his agony has nothing to do with retributive justice. And once again, Job refuses to curse God. *Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?* he rebukes his wife, when she tells him he must just give up on God.

The scene is now set for the story of Job, which runs for forty-one chapters. It is deeply disturbing. But it resonates with us. Bad things *do* happen to good people. And deep down we know it's perverse, always to blame the victim by trying to attribute some sin or other to them, as the explanation for their suffering. Of course, this *is* a work of literature; we are not to take literally the diabolically playful God who permits and approves Job's torments. But Job still raises the profound question, where is God in all this? Where is God in the unfair, random, unearned suffering of humankind? These are powerful questions, and Job is not a book for the faint-hearted!

It's far too early to start drawing conclusions about Job; we have three more weeks to go on this troubling book. But at this stage we can tentatively conclude perhaps three things. First, the scriptures are *not* simplistic in their view of innocent suffering; Job asks the same hard questions that continue to trouble us today. Job gives the lie to the formulaic response that all suffering is the result of sin. We should feel a certain vindication that our deepest instincts are affirmed in this book. Life truly is far more complex than that. Second, not only is Job a pillar of faith, but God has an inspiring faith *in* Job. So often biblical characters are terribly flawed. But not Job. Reduced to a loathsome physical state, robbed of his children and his property, Job refuses to give up on God, just as God retains his immovable belief in Job. This may be a work of fiction, but it paints a deeply touching picture of the relationship that can be enjoyed between the Creator and the created.

And third, there is a certain resonance with the suffering of Jesus Christ. If Job was without fault, Jesus was utterly without sin. Yet he suffered an excruciating death on the cross, undeservedly, unjustly, and uncomplainingly. His dying words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" suggest, not abandonment or condemnation of God, but a cry of bewilderment that such a thing

could happen to an innocent man. That is the profound question raised by Job; and yet in our Christian understanding, we learn that, even out of such horrendous suffering, God can produce great blessing.

We will see if Job eventually reaches the same conclusion over the next few weeks.

Amen