

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 10 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). We continue today with a further dive into the challenging book of Job. I hope the thoughts here are helpful to you, both in thinking about Job, and in thinking your way through some of life's most challenging questions.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Almighty God,
who is and ever was and ever will be,
you alone are good, you alone are worthy and great,
you alone are to be worshipped and honoured.
Your greatness is beyond the grasp of our human minds;
your ways are not ours to comprehend,
your mystery is impenetrable.
Yet your love penetrates our world like rays of the most radiant sunlight,
and the darkness can never overcome it.
In our uncertain world, only your love and your grace are certain,
your extravagant gifts to an unworthy humankind.
We stand in awe of who you are,
dazzled by your grace and love,
and we worship and adore you.

But we confess that we sometimes try to limit your greatness.
We would prefer a God who conforms to rules we can understand.
We want a predictable God, a tamed God.
While we want to be the objects of your love and forgiveness,
we'd be happier to reserve them just for those of whom we approve.
We would like your actions in the world to accord with *our* wishes,
to reflect *our* values, to echo *our* likes and dislikes.
We think it would be better if you were less profligate with your grace,
making it available only to those in the "club" to which we belong.
In short, Father, we try to put you into a box,
to domesticate you into our service,
so that you take a comfortable place in our lives,
and cease to challenge us.
We confess that we try to rob you of your identity and your power,
because we would prefer a convenient God, available to do our bidding.
Forgive us our arrogance, our presumption and our short-sightedness.
Remind us that our redemption rests on your mighty love;
that only a God who is truly God can be the Redeemer
whom we so desperately need.
Teach us that "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom",
and to stand before you in the utmost awe of your majesty and wonder.
For we ask for your forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen

2 Declaration of Forgiveness.

The wonder of almighty God is this,
that he sent his only son into the world,

not to judge the world but to save the world;
indeed to die for the world,
so that whoever believes in him might not perish,
but have eternal life.
In the risen Christ, our sins are truly forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Reading** –
Job 23:1-17

4 **Sermon:** See below

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

(Today is World Mental Health Day. Over the past decade or so, our community has had a growing awareness of mental health, but the pandemic has focused the spotlight like never before on mental well-being, as people who had previously thought they were immune to mental health issues came to realise that anybody can be vulnerable. In the background, too, we have heard so many reports of distressing mental health issues among veterans, and their devastating consequences, such that a Royal Commission has been established. So our prayers today are for those who suffer mental health issues, and those who tend to them.)

God our Father,

We come to you today to pray for the issues of mental health
that face our community.

Deep down, we know that mental illness is no different from physical illness,
and yet we have permitted sufferers to be stigmatised,
and to feel ashamed or embarrassed by their ailments.

We have regarded mental illness as a sign of weakness,
and believed the fiction that the strong are immune and invulnerable.

We have persisted with the belief that sufferers can simply get a grip
and “get over it”.

And yet, Father,

we are confronted by evidence that gives the lie to our prejudices.

We see the statistics of the huge proportion of people who,
at one time or another, will experience mental illness.

The pandemic has amply demonstrated
that *anyone* can develop mental health issues in adverse circumstances.

Too many reports confront us with the high level of mental health problems
among our veterans, almost by definition strong and resilient people.

As Australian of the Year in 2010,

Professor Patrick McGorry passionately proclaimed the facts about mental illness
and its pervasiveness,

while calling out the secrecy and shame that surround it.

So we come, humbly, today, to pray for all who suffer with mental health issues.

We pray first of all for their treatment and recovery,
that they will always find acceptance, sympathy and sound therapy,
and that our health care systems will be funded to support their level of need.

But we pray too that we, as a community,
will cast aside our prejudices and preconceptions,
that we will come to see mental illness for what it is,
genuine sickness that afflicts people as indiscriminately as any other illness;
that we will eschew any notion of “weakness”;

that we will never allow a sufferer to feel shame or embarrassment,
or to feel that they must bottle up their suffering for fear of stigma and judgment.
Forbid that our attention be diverted by the pandemic and its effects,
falling into the trap of thinking that, once lockdowns and restrictions are over,
so too is any problem concerning mental health.
May we acknowledge the vast number of sufferers in our midst,
and acknowledge too
that anyone – including ourselves –
can find themselves in the throes of mental illness,
through no fault of their own, and for no apparent reason.
May we change our community forever,
to make it a healthier place for sufferers of mental health issues.
We pray too for those who treat those with mental illnesses –
for psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, mental health nurses,
and allied professionals and support people.
Be their strength and their inspiration,
and may our community generously resource their work.
And we pray for all who live or work or associate with mental health sufferers,
that all of us be on the lookout for signs of distress or danger,
be willing to ask the “Are you okay” question,
willing to lend a sympathetic ear, and willing to provide support as we are able.
Father, we are praying for a mighty but urgent change across our community,
and we ask that you will bless these changes,
and give us the gifts to be their champions and exemplars.

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

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you now,
and abide with you always.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

The classic series about World War II, *The World at War*, included an episode called “Holocaust”. Of course it dealt with the unthinkable persecution, then extermination, of the Jews by the German Nazis and the governments which co-operated with them. One moment in the program stands out in my memory, and always will. An inmate of Auschwitz, a Jew, who had been forced to work for the Germans, herding his fellow Jews into the gas chambers, related how some of those in the queue had cried out to God. “God, where are you? This is about you! Where are you?” one of them pleaded. When God failed to respond, he then concluded, “There is no God.”

Last week, we saw how the book of Job confronts some very hard question, Why do bad things happen to good people? How can tragedy strike so indiscriminately, afflicting good and bad alike? And how can it be that, in a just world, evil-doers so often seem to prosper? Where is God in all this.

This week’s reading comes from chapter 23. We’ve jumped over a full twenty chapters of Job. Actually, we can be assured that the Lectionary writers were not negligent in making this choice. One commentator described much of Job as “flyover territory”; and it’s true that, while we do miss out on some powerful poetry, we don’t actually lose the gist of Job by going straight to chapter 23. You’ll recall that Job has been stripped of all his wealth, has had all his children killed, and has had an atrocious skin affliction cast upon him. We left Job, sitting in the ashes, scratching his sores with a scrap of broken pottery. Essentially, in the intervening chapters, he is visited by three friends, who come, purportedly to comfort him, but actually end up debating with him. The debate is about the reason for Job’s suffering, and about the reason for human suffering in general. Job’s friends are adamant believers in retributive justice – suffering is God’s punishment for sin, and so Job’s suffering must be punishment for *his* sin. One of them demands of Job,

*Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plough iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.*

But Job continues to maintain his innocence. He is, he insists, a “just and blameless man”. Despite his friends’ accusations, we know this to be true, because God *said* it was true at the beginning of the story, and has repeated it several times. We *know* that Job has not been made to suffer because of anything he’s done. But Job’s focus is not just on the injustice of his own afflictions; he also calls out the apparent impunity of the wicked. His friends, he insists, are wrong about the wicked getting their just deserts.

*It is all one; therefore I say,
he [God] destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
When disaster brings sudden death,
he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.*

As the story develops, Job grows less stoic about his suffering, and more indignant. He wants to confront God, to “have his day in court” with God.

*Then call, and I will answer; he demands of God,
or let me speak, and you reply to me.
How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.*

Job’s friends remain unconvinced. Still clinging to a simple belief in the consistency and reliability of God’s retributive justice, they insist that Job is in denial about his sin.

*Is it for your piety that he [God] reproves you,
and enters into judgement with you?
Is not your wickedness great?
There is no end to your iniquities.*

So we come to chapter 23. Our passage begins with Job's yearning for a meeting with God. He wants to confront God with his innocence, to plead his case directly to God.

*There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge.*

In a sense, in this demand, Job is not far from his friends' idea of God's perfect retributive justice. The only thing is that he doesn't think God's doing a very good job of it. He wants to confront God with the fact that, in his case, God's got it wrong. He, Job, doesn't *deserve* to be treated the way he has been. He wants God to show cause.

But God eludes him.

*O that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling
If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

As his cries develop, Job moves from righteous indignation about God, to a fearful lament. He recognises that God will do as God wishes to do. And in fact God terrifies him. "I am in dread of him." By the end of his speech, Job is no longer insisting on his right to justice; he simply wishes to hide away from God altogether.

*God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face.*

So we come again to that profound question that preoccupies the whole story of Job: why are such pain and suffering, such tragedy, inflicted upon the righteous and the innocent? Why are the wicked allowed to prosper, and apparently to enjoy impunity from retributive justice? How can it be that a good man – a man affirmed by God himself as blameless – can not only be made to suffer so terribly, but even to come to live in absolute terror of God? Job's terror is *not* "the fear of the Lord" that is the beginning of wisdom. The Hebrew word is quite different, and this is fearful dread.

We have a way to go with Job yet – two more weeks in which the Lectionary takes us to two more key passages which draw some of the threads together; although don't think that we will be led to a beautiful Hollywood-style resolution! But we cannot leave today's passage without recognising that, despite Job's despair, there are, nevertheless, a few positives here, if only we look for them.

First, the story of Job reminds us that our conversations with God can be very robust. You may recall some of Moses' complaints to God, demanding to know why he's been put in charge of such stiff-necked and disobedient people. Some of the prophets argued with God, too. Job reminds us of that tradition, of going at God with hammer and tongs. *We* are used always to being deferential to God; we pretty much accept that it's just our fate to get whatever God hands out to us. We pray that God will bless us, but when we suffer, we too carry that sense that, somehow, we must have earned the suffering. Most of us would hesitate to confront God, to accuse God of injustice. But Job is feisty – feistier than most of us would ever dare to be. He wants to haul God into court, and to make

his case against God. He wants to demand of God that he show cause why he's inflicted such suffering on him.

*I will give free utterance to my complaint; [says Job]
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
I will say to God, Do not condemn me;
let me know why you contend against me.*

And yet God tolerates Job's passionate and indignant complaint. Job can be completely honest with God; and their relationship is quite robust enough to withstand the assault. Perhaps we should take heed of the tenor of some of these robust Old Testament relationships with God; perhaps at times our own conversations with God are not as honest as they could be. God can take our anger, our frustration and our distress, because God has experienced what it is like to be human like us.

A second very positive note to take from Job is his abiding faith in God. In today's world, a great many people will cite the injustices of the world, the suffering of the most vulnerable and the apparent impunity of the powerful, as a reason not to believe in God. How could a just God preside over such an unjust world? they want to know. That is precisely the question that preoccupies the writer of Job, but his character Job never gives up on God, never doubts God, never uses his suffering as an excuse to abandon God. In chapter 19, in the midst of his woes and his friends' accusations, Job proclaims,

*... I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God ...*

That is an extraordinary statement of abiding faith in God, come what may.

And Job maintains his belief in the power and might of God. In our passage today, his righteous indignation turns to fear, because he realises the puniness of his case in the face of the living God.

*What he desires, that he does, says Job resignedly.
For he will complete what he appoints for me;
and many such things are in his mind.
Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.*

Despite the way it may seem, Job's faith in God and his resignation are not in conflict. Only a fearsome and powerful God can be a Redeemer God. And Job realises that, before such a God, anything he could say or do withers into insignificance. Job certainly *has* challenged God's justice, but he has certainly *not* given up on God. Job is beginning to understand that God is just so much greater than he that his arguments, his ideas of what is just and what is not, simply evaporate into nothingness in the face of almighty God. Job's is a robust, exemplary faith indeed. It is a powerful expression of what "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" means when the rubber hits the road. And it's another lesson that surely has value for us in this "age of entitlement", when we and our rights are the sun around which our own little solar systems orbit.

For Job *is* a wise man, in that Biblical sense that he "fears" God. Job recognises the sovereignty of God. Job knows that the only source of hope *is* God. His despair has not led him to abandon that hope. In fact, in all his suffering, Job clings *to* that hope. I find myself relating to Job very much in this respect. I will not easily forget sitting in church one Sunday morning twenty years ago, in a year which presented me with personal challenges that brought me to my knees. The minister of the day looked around the congregation, and said words to the effect of, "I know the challenges some of

you are facing right now, and frankly, I wonder why you're even still here." I don't know if I was one of the people he had in mind, but I'm pretty sure I was. But my reaction was not to wander the same thing, but simply to ask myself, Where else would I go? To whom else could I turn? If God is no longer in his heaven, then where could there possibly be hope of any kind? With Job, I cried, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

Perhaps that is why, despite the genocide of the Final Solution, which saw the murder of perhaps six million Jews, there is still a sturdy and vibrant Jewish faith throughout the world. That desperate cry of one man, "There is no God", found no resonance, for so to abandon hope would be to abandon life itself.

The last point to make doesn't actually come from the passage at all, but it's surely the most important. As Christians we know that Job's despair and Job's suffering are not unknown to God. Just as God knows our frustration, our anger and our distress, God also knows what it is to suffer and to be driven to despair. Because God, incarnate in the Lord Jesus, was subjected to *our* injustice and *our* cruelty. On the cross, Jesus knew *our* despair and *our* sense of abandonment. The book of Job takes a forensic look at human suffering, but that suffering is not something that is unknown to God. God has suffered as we suffer, and God continues to suffer when we suffer. Ultimately, Job's dispute with God is moving from making accusations *against* God, to becoming embroiled in the deep mysteries *of* God. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom because God *is* so much greater than we can begin to fathom. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we can affirm not only that God is truly one with us in our suffering, but that, despite all that we cannot know or understand, we know that our Redeemer lives.

Amen