

Readings for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

23rd June 2024

First Reading: Job 38:1-11

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?’”

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Gospel: St Mark 4:35-41

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Some of you will, I am sure, be familiar with the advertising slogan of the cosmetics company, L'Oréal: 'Because you're worth it'; or sometimes 'Because I'm worth it', or 'Because she's worth it'. It's been in use for more than 50 years and has been an empowering message for many women. However, it doesn't take much thought to realise that, although many people are 'worth it', nevertheless they don't get whatever 'it' is for many and diverse reasons. We recognise that many people simply don't get what they deserve in life.

Today's readings all give us examples of people facing times of difficulty. Firstly God's response to Job, who suffered unjustly; from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he lists many of the challenges he faced in his ministry; and, from Mark, the story of the disciples in the boat in a severe storm while Jesus remained asleep at the back.

I am going to focus mainly on Job, because readings from the book of Job are rare in our three-year lectionary cycle and it is a book I love because of its human honesty. It addresses our struggle to reconcile a good God with the reality of evil in the world, even if it provides no easy answers. Why does a good and just person like Job suffer so terribly?

To remind ourselves of the story that precedes today's reading: Job is a faithful and godly man who has been blessed with a large family and many possessions. Satan, here a term simply meaning 'the adversary', roams the earth, spots Job and suggests to God that Job is only faithful because life is going well for him. God is so convinced of Job's faithfulness that he allows Satan to test Job, to wreak havoc in his life.

Satan fully expected Job to start cursing God when things started to go really badly for him, but Job did not do so. He protested his innocence and questioned God at length as to why this was happening to him, but he already knew that meaning in life comes from God and he wanted to preserve his relationship with God. The book proclaims from the start that there is no correlation between sin and suffering, in contrast to the assumption made by Job's friends, the so-called comforters who provided no comfort. Perhaps, like many of us, they wanted God to behave in neat, predictable ways, but God does not keep a balance sheet of sin and punishment.

After two chapters giving the background to Job's suffering, and thirty-five chapters of Job's questioning and protestations of innocence, and his friends' unhelpful and incorrect explanations and calls on him to repent of the wrongdoing they are convinced he must have done, God speaks. We have the first part of God's response in today's reading. 'The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind...' But there is no answer. God responds only with questions, questions that emphasise the gulf between human understanding and divine knowledge and creativity. Not one of Job's questions is answered.

God's response sounds harsh to me, as if he is saying to Job 'Just who do you think you are?' – a complete put down. But, if we look carefully at this passage and what follows it, we find that Job is never reprimanded or criticised for having asked questions, or for protesting his innocence. God takes him seriously but, in extolling the wonder and magnificence of creation, God shows him that his human understanding is simply not sufficient to engage in debate with God. It is a reminder that we don't know it all; that we may be made in God's image, but we are not God's equals.

Instead, God offers Job a new perspective that makes answers to his questions unnecessary, a warm and personal relationship with God. Job is delighted; it is enough to know that God is there, that God loves him and he loves God. One of the underlying messages of the story of Job is that God calls each of us into relationship with him and that is all we need.

Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan priest, writer and teacher, wrote a book called *Job and the Mystery of Suffering*. In it, he notes that we all face times of difficulty, suffering and loss in our lives, but only some face real tragedy. He says that the book of Job probably only makes sense when we really have our backs up against the wall as it is in such times of tragedy that we really come to experience God rather than just learn what the church, or theologians, or the Bible say about God. Rohr continues, if we have been fortunate enough not to have faced tragedy, to understand Job and suffering, we have to try 'to feel what it is like to be empty, abandoned and uncared for; not only for 5 minutes, not about trivia..., but rather as an entire life's stance.'

The Scriptures, including the book of Job, point us outward into the reality of our lives and the reality of the world, to encounter God. It is there that God walks with us as we face our fears and our doubts and transforms them, even as we struggle to believe that God is with us and put that belief into practice.

Job prefigures Jesus as one who suffered unjustly. Although our usual images of God are as omnipotent, infinite and perfect, the incarnation and suffering of Jesus also tell us that God is not aloof, oblivious to our feelings, nor a spectator; God is a participant in suffering and is with us in our struggles. The story of Job gives us permission, should we need it, to lament our situation or that of others, to rail against innocent suffering, to question God. And, although we may have to wait for an answer that may not be an explanation, as Job did, it assures us that what matters is that God is with us in those times.

We see something similar in our Gospel reading and the disciples in the boat. We may feel, like them, that we are in mortal danger in some violent storm, but Jesus is there with us in the boat of our life's journey. Jesus listens to our fears and speaks to them, assuring us that there is no need to fear. Jesus stilling of the storm demonstrates that ultimately God's love will triumph because, to paraphrase the slogan I started with, we're all worth it, the world is worth it. God loves us. Jesus died and rose again for us.