

# Sermon

## 'The Suffering of Job'

Year B 2021, Pentecost 22, Job 42.1-6, 10-17



I recall the first time I preached from the Book of Job. Having led the congregation, through Job's tortured complaint against God, on the basis of suffering, I was humbled when I spoke afterwards with a parishioner. More experienced than I, and the son of a leading Baptist pastor, having had sat through a few sermons from the book of Job, he looked at me, with loving concern, and said, simply 'It's a test.' A test of Job's faithfulness to God.

In the first part of his life, God blessed Job; and Job worshipped God. But will Job worship God, in suffering? Or will he turn away from God, because of suffering? As in modern atheism.

At the beginning of the present lectionary series on Job, in his letter to the Hebrews, the Apostle Paul wrote that 'we do not have a high priest who is

unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin’.

Jesus was like us in every way. A human being, he was tested, as we are. But Jesus was unlike us in this way. In the face of temptation, he did not sin. He refused, in a radical way, the human temptation – that of the creature, that desires to be God.

In a fallen world, in our baptismal life, in our new life, in fellowship with Christ, we are to put to death our original human nature, that desires to be God, and begin a new life, a new human nature, of sonship. That sonship that means faithful obedience to God, and his righteous will.

This is the fulfilment of our water baptism. Where, like Jesus before us, the Holy Spirit was given to us, as a permanent gift, in our hearts. Where, like Jesus, it was declared of us, ‘This is my Son, my daughter, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

To be a son, a daughter, a child of God, is, as it was for Jesus, in the wilderness, to turn away from evil. Turn away from the devil. Turn away from temptation. Turn away from sin.

The nature of sin is described in another classic book of wisdom from the Old Testament: the book of Genesis. Created in the image of God, the human being is created at the same time to be a sinner. There is sin in every individual human heart. The sin that deceives the human person, by promising a fuller life, and precisely by such foolish hopes, it delivers him or her to death, the Apostle Paul says (Rom. 7, II). In the book of Genesis, have created human beings, in the image of God, God strictly prohibited his human creatures from eating the fruits of the tree in the centre of the garden, because the first human beings would die of its fruits. This is because eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the serpent seduced Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. The serpent persuaded Eve however: "You will not die," but "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3, 5).

That means that human beings will be empowered to know everything and judge everything, and God does not allow that. Thus the desire for the fullness of life becomes the occasion to violate the divine law. The great and first commandment is broken. The desire that turns against God and his command is sin. It means to turn away from God. Therefore the desire deceives the human person. It arouses the illusion of the fullness of life, but in reality delivers the person to death.

As human beings, like Jesus we are tested, throughout our time in the wilderness, to do something spectacular, to put God to the test, to be given all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, if only we will fall down and worship, the prince of this world – temptation is real, it is profound, it is

attractive. But to the person who, like Jesus, will in this earthly life 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him', to them is given the gift, the inheritance, the prize, of eternal life.

Not in this world do we look for eternal life, but from the future of the kingdom of God alone. Not in any unbroken continuation of the present world, but from the other side, on the other side of a break, on the other side of the crisis, of the divine judgment of the world, do we look for eternal life. Beyond the powers of sin and death that continue in the world, that have the dominion in this world world. Only when these are thrown down, only when these are no more, only when the kingdom of God himself comes, only when God himself, is 'all in all', will there be salvation. From the throes of sin and death. From this world, this vale of tears.

Only then will it come to pass, that world for which Judaism and Christianity awaits. Beyond this vale of tears. Beyond this world of sin and death. To the kingdom of God himself:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;

For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,

come down out of heaven from God,

prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his people,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first world is passing away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’

On that day the Lord will answer, all who in this life, like Job, have questioned him, his character, his justice, his righteousness, in the face of evil, suffering and pain. When, out of the whirlwind, the Lord himself will declare:

‘Who is this that darkens my counsel 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 cornerstones 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?’

Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken.’

Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?

Declare, if you know all this.’

Face to face, before God himself, in the final demonstration, of all of the fulness of his power, at which all the political kingdoms of this world, will fall, and God becomes all in all. On that day, when the future kingdom of God comes in final perfection of the world, the human race itself will fall silent, and say, along with Job:

'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. You said, 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and I repent in dust and ashes.'

Beyond the shore, of a world of sin and unbelief, there is the distant shore, of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of justice and peace, for which the human race, and creation itself, does long. And that cannot be achieved, in this world of evil, sin and death. In this world, this vale of tears.

This is not the kingdom of God. The Church – the world – waits. But there is steak on our plate as we wait. As already now, to the elect, both Jew, and Christian, the hidden God, has revealed himself. Calling us out of the darkness of the world, into the light of hope, for a better day. For the kingdom of God to come, the justice and peace of God be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. A kingdom, a justice, and a peace, that has now dawned in Jesus Christ. A dawn light that shines, through the stained, glass windows of the Church. Out into the world. The dawn light, of the world's new day.