

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

During the last four weeks, our Sunday readings have included selections from the Old Testament Book of Job, and I have neglected to share any of my reflections about it with you. But there is much in this Bible book which is particularly helpful to us, even in our twenty-first century daily life. So, give a warm welcome to 'the Book of Job'! This story of the man named Job doesn't pretend to be history, there are no sweeping incidents of battles or geographic journeys; there are no typical prophetic ecstasies, no great divine commandments, no compelling soap-opera dramas, no larger-than-life biblical heroes; it's main character isn't even really Jewish, a member of the chosen Israelite people. Job is an Edomite, a descendant not of Jacob, but of Esau. But the Book of Job is an extended parable, 42 chapters long, which explores the nature of true religion in curious, sometimes even ironic ways. Is it the nature of religion to be a carrot-and-stick plan, where God has laid-down-the-law and provided cosmic punishments and rewards? Or is it more than that? Does being devoted to God's service just mean obediently staying within the prescribed boundaries? Or is there more adventure to being one of God's creatures? Is it enough to know *about* God, or is true religion about actually knowing God.

The story begins with Almighty God holding a council meeting, maybe a vestry meeting. Now, God has a whole universe to oversee, and so he needs representatives to help him out. One of the council members is called 'the Satan', whose job it is to spend time on planet earth, walking among the creatures there and reporting back to God about its condition. Spending time on the earth, observing what's been happening there, has made the Satan really cynical about the quality and value of the people there. While God is confident that human beings really good-naturedly appreciate all he has done for them and love him like a father, the Satan disagrees. He insists that, given the right conditions, even God's most faithful person would curse God relentlessly to his face. God, though, thinks that's so unlikely that he's willing to let the Satan prepare a demonstration, and chooses his beloved Job as a case-in-point. Job not only has a reputation for being a God-fearing man, but is also a very successful and prosperous member of his ancient community, with a large family, many slaves and valuable herds, and a life which has clearly been blessed. Surely, God says, his servant Job would never betray or curse him. But it is the Satan's plan to test this conviction by plunging Job into degradation and despair, and in some weird plot of the story-telling, God agrees to put Job to this test.

For his part, Job is indeed thankful for the quality of his life and all his possessions, for the love of his family and his faith in the future. From his point of view, God is in his heaven and all is right with the world. It might even be the best of all possible worlds God might have created. Until it isn't. Unaware of the strange deal made at the council meeting, Job is shocked to find his world fall apart. His beloved children die. His flocks and herds all perish. His own health deteriorates, and he is covered with painful and embarrassing sores. He falls from an enviable height to a devastating mess. For 41 chapters he descends into more and more suffering, and wonders just what he did to anger God, just what he might have done to disappoint God, that he should be so afflicted. He sits himself down on the ash-heap, as if he were some trash God intends to burn. What could possibly have gone wrong? To the best of his recollection, he has not sinned. To the best of his knowledge, he has committed no offense which should have condemned him to such justice. If this was God's doing, then just what the heck was God thinking? Job's wife, as you can imagine, was furious. She tries to bait Job into cursing God for all these times of trial and trouble. But for all his misery, for all his degradation, through all this descent into hell-on-earth, Job is not seduced into cursing God.

For, you see, what the cynical Satan had not expected, what had elude his calculation, was that such terrible suffering wouldn't separate Job from God, but actually give him an opportunity to get closer to God. When Job had questions and doubts about God's justice, about whether he was being offered either a stick or a carrot, he turned to God in desperate prayer. Essentially, he asked 'why me?!' His best friends tried to

explain it all to him from what they thought they knew *about* God, but it became clear to Job that even with all their knowledge, they had no true experience *of* God. By not having had a personal relationship with God, they had missed the point. Job began to long for revelation rather than facts. He overcame the human tendency to point fingers, and assign blame, with a deeper desire to be in communion with God. And God spoke to him. In fact, God gets fired-up and honors Job with some long involved speeches! And in this prayerful conversation, God reveals the enormity of creation, wonders and marvels and miracles which Job could not have imagined even in his wildest dreams. And through this personal contact, Job's perspectives about God's leadership, about his place in creation, about the nature of true religion, all undergo a life-changing alteration. A transformation. Never again will Job be satisfied with an image of God in his heaven and all being right with the world. Never again will Job be satisfied with the systematic descriptions his friends have for God. Never again will the simplistic model of reward and punishment, carrot and stick, be enough to nourish job's faith. He recants his former suppositions, changes his mind, rejects his previous misunderstandings, and all for the love of a personal relationship with the creator.

So today Nigel read for us parts of the 42nd chapter of this story, the final chapter of this extended parable. And if you take the broad view of this chapter, you might find that it ironically seems to contradict the very theme of the parable, that Job is, in fact, receiving a special reward for his faithfulness. He has been beaten with a stick, has been thereby persuaded to do and say the right things, and has earned the prize of the carrot. It is so contradictory, in fact, that some scholars think that this ending was quietly added by some later scribe who just couldn't let it be. Does it fit with the story's teaching that God would give back everything Job had lost before the suffering began? Does it negate the whole point if God intervenes to restore Job's former fortunes? Does God, in true religion, give riches or give opportunities to the suffering servant? Does God answer prayer with rewards or opportunities? A closer reading of the ending to Job's story might provide some clues: The author tells us that Job prayed for his friends, the ones who misunderstood God's true nature, perhaps asking God's forgiveness for them. It is his change in perspective that makes those prayers possible. And, while we all know that children lost to death can never be replace, Job now has the opportunity to raise a new family, children to whom he can recommend his new perspective. And he can use his new flocks and herds to feed the neighbors and probably those in need. And notice that there is no mention of slaves in his new, reinvigorated lifestyle. Those at Job's banquet table still talk of the 'evil' things God did to him, and he doesn't try to talk them out of that thinking, but rather lets his actions and his prayers speak louder than words. All in all, it is not Job's suffering which has changed him, but his new relationship with God. While before he could tell you a lot *about* God, his new familiarity *with* God has made all the difference.

Dear Friends, we have endured, and continue to endure, a time of particular suffering. Much of our former, blessed, life has been taken from us. For some this has only been an annoyance, for others a true devastation. I ask you to consider whether we are using this time of suffering to point fingers of blame or to get closer to God. I do not presume to think that God is testing us with this pandemic or not, but I do wonder just what our faithful response to it could be. If we are asking 'why me?', are we ready to listen to God's answer? Are we open-hearted enough to receive the kind of revelation Job heard in this story? Wherever this test might have originated, is it giving us the opportunity to deepen our faith, improve our perspective, and strengthen our religious devotion to service? Are we taking it personally, or finding it to be a personal invitation? I pray for us all, not for reward or restitution, but for a closer walk with God, whether in feast or famine. Amen