

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2024 Year B

As Catholics we do not tend to know an awful lot about the Books of the Old Testament, especially the Book of Job so I would like to say a few words this morning about that first reading the reading which is from the Book of Job.

I do not suppose that many of you have actually gone to the Old Testament section of your Bibles and explored the Book of Job, but if you do take the time and the trouble you will really find that it is worthwhile, if you bear in mind what it is all about.

The Book of Job is a very clever poetic work, written by an unknown author, and it tries to solve the perennial problem as to why it is that, if a just God exists, then why is it that the good and the innocent suffer in this life and that it is the sinner who seems to prosper.

That becomes a pressing problem the more one seeks to lead a good and moral life, for in plain terms what is the point in attempting goodness and virtue if you end up like Job, on the dung heap, diseased and, disconsolate.

At the beginning of the book Job is depicted as a truly just man. In Jewish thought material and spiritual prosperity were the outward signs that God smiled upon and rewarded the efforts of the just man. So, Job, at the beginning of the Book is prosperous and at peace, with a large family of loving sons and daughters, a good wife, and a household to satisfy every whim.

Now God and Satan look down upon this idyllic existence and Satan throws a challenge at God and says, "It is all very well for a man to love and praise you when everything in that person's life seems to be going his way, but let us see how a just man acts towards you when you seem to afflict and punish him for his virtue, instead of rewarding him."

God has supreme trust in Job and so He takes up Satan's challenge and lets him do what he wants to Job, except to finally harm his soul.

So, Satan gleefully sets to work and gradually Job's whole world collapses. His children are killed, his wealth and property disappear overnight, he himself is reduced to begging and his body begins to fester with sores and disease.

But Job stands firm because in all humility he knows in his heart of heart that he has done little or nothing to deserve such punishment.

Finally, his loving wife's support quickly turns to mockery, and she wants him to have no further part of a God who could treat him in such a way. "Curse God and die" she advises him.

But Job is a remarkable man, and his calm response is "That if we are always ready to accept good from the hand of God, then we ought likewise be prepared to accept his chastisement."

Even Job's good name and reputation is now lost. His 3 friends who gather to console him, can scarce recognize him, and to outward appearance he now has all the signs of a great and public Sinner, utter destitution, and misery. God has surely abandoned him and so greatly does his suffering affect them that all they can do is sit with him for 7 days and 7 nights in silent, anguished support.

Job's heart is now close to breaking point, and he cannot understand what has happened to him. He despairs, cursing the day of his birth, wishing that he had never been born.

Now what happens next you must read for yourself, but there follows page after page of some of the most sublime poetic writing in the Bible, as Job and his 3 friends argue back and forth as to what really is the point to life and virtue, if God's heart is closed.

Today's reading is but a small part of a long dialogue of spiritual anguish and despair spoken by Job, in which he complains that time brings no relief; sometimes the days fly by, sometimes they drag, but no matter what the time is, the pain is just as sharp and deep.

The pain of being rejected by the God that one has loved and served faithfully, the pain of not being able to believe in such a God's existence anymore, and all the endless darkness and despair that must follow.

Does that sound familiar? Lots of people have been in that dark and lonely place.

Does it also perhaps suggest that the innocent figure of Christ, the Son of God Himself, in the New Testament, wracked with the physical pain on the Cross, but cut far deeper by His spiritual pain and darkness that He cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Part of the cause of that spiritual pain is surely the awareness of one's innocence outraged and even seemingly ignored and punished by God.

Where else then can one turn, where can one look to make sense of it all, if a loving God doesn't seem to be an answer. Perhaps the lesson that Job had to at last painfully realize and which Christ by example teaches us is that -

A) Compared to God's own infinite purity and righteousness, what man can stand up and claim his own justness and innocent as a complaint against God for the hardship and pain in his life. Who was more blameless than Christ himself?

B) It is naive and simplistic to look upon spiritual or material prosperity as blessings, or hardship as a curse from God. God operates at a level and a timescale way above such things and more often than not they are accidental, arbitrary states of being, part of the risks, and the ups and downs of life.

C) We must learn to cope with such ups and downs in our lives as Christian, without letting them destroy our peace of soul. To be prepared to accept blessing and misfortune alike, knowing and believing that all things pass, and that in the end we are always held tight and safe in the palm of God's loving hand.

D) Finally, we have to discover and realize in the solitude and privacy of our own circumstances that the only way to cope with pain, darkness, and misfortune is to imitate as Christians the example of Christ and see them as having some ultimate value and worth in the sight of God. In simple terms perhaps to offer them, with a joyful and trusting heart, back to God himself in expiation for our own sins and the sins of others.

Suffering for the Christian can only have some meaning and value if it can be seen in terms of expiation, utterly trusting, like Job, that God's love and mercy triumphs over it all.

The lesson of Job is that everything passes, both joy and pain. We for our part must hold fast and endure while God works out His own mysterious will in our lives. What matters is that we stay close to Him and possess Him in the end.