

Job 1:1, 2:1 - 10
Psalm 26
Hebrews 1:1 - 4, 2:5 - 12
Mark 10:2 - 16

Walking in the integrity of faith

You know the old wedding telegram: "May the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, and the children of Israel be yours!" Job is not really very patient. But he is prosperous and blameless. He feared God, lived an upright life and did not resort to evil. His faithfulness set him apart from others. But later, in despair and fury, he hurls protests at the almighty, curses the day of his birth, and comes to see God as an oppressor. But his deep trust in God remained. Job is a folk tale told for a purpose, which explores a complex series of challenges and responses between God, Satan, Job and his friends. Job is a symbol for everyman.

The first chapter sets the scene. The curtain goes up and we witness a meeting of the Heavenly Council where God boasts about the righteousness of Job. The membership of the Heavenly Council includes Satan, who is like a prosecutor: an Adversary, a provocateur. Later Judaism and Christianity adopted the idea of Satan as a transcendent being, who acts independently of God's will. But here Satan acts rather like a risk manager who operates within the scope of God's power. As the Adversary he wants to test the proposition that human beings, represented by Job, fear God only because of the reward they will receive from it. He suggests that if Job's prosperity and wellbeing is undermined he will deny God. This is the sort of challenge that could be directed to the prosperity theology beloved of modern day Christians. And this challenge puts God in a no-win situation. If God refuses to have Job put to the test, it looks as though he is fenced off from reality. If God allows Job to be tested it seems heartless. A deal is struck. The Adversary embarks on the calamitous test, which results in physical disfigurement for Job, and later much worse things. Despite the escalating suffering, and his wife urging him to curse God, Job maintains his integrity. He does not deny or rupture his relationship of trust in God, even though it gets pushed to the limit. And he does not break the good quality of his relationships with other people. To his wife he says: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of the Lord, and not the bad?" And later he says: "The Lord gave and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." His integrity was that he simply and straightforwardly trusted God. Perhaps something of what Job had has been seen in the compelling and remarkable public faith of the Amish people of Paradise, in response to the horrendous tragedy they suffered this week.

Job does not provide us with answers to the problem of human suffering, or the answer to how goodness and almighty power are reconciled in God. His experience provides a context for exploring the question of the character and quality of our relationship with God. Throughout the cycle of speeches found in the poetic section Job seems to hover between doubt and hope. He becomes increasingly tortured by the great gulf that exists between him and God. In Job we see that God is not mortal, God is "wholly other," the

transcendent sovereign to whom Job, as a mere human, has no access. Eventually God does speak, and Job opens himself to God in an entirely new way.

Despite some similarities between Job's life and that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, this book has not become central to our tradition of faith. No doctrines are based on it. There is no evidence in it of the God who made a covenant with the ancestors. We do not find in Job a vision of a gracious God who loved the world so much that he sent the Son to redeem it, such as is celebrated in Hebrews. But while Job may not figure as central in these ways, in terms of human experience it resonates with all who have to negotiate the dark passages of life.

We are unable to read Job at arms length. It presents us with imponderable questions about the majesty of God and the undeserved suffering we see and know in the world. Job will not fit neatly into a category of providing answers to the questions of suffering or receiving just deserts. But, as with Psalms of Lament which offer another angle on faith, the presence in Scripture of the story of the upright and suffering Job serves as a means of keeping these deep questions open and present for us. We know our sorrows, and our sorrows know us and know how to find us. Because of Job we are allowed to see that the suffering to which we cannot resign ourselves is understood in Scripture and that people of faith are entitled to lament and protest to God as did the ancient people. Our Job-like questions, born of our Job like pain, do not exclude us from the biblical story, or cast us out from the fold. Instead, we find, as we see in Hebrews, that God exposed himself fully to the suffering and death that we all know. What God did was for everyone, and when our heartfelt cries resound with those of Job, Scripture honours the integrity of our faith and experience, our puzzlement at life and our frustration at the mystery of God.

Walking in the integrity of faith that Job stands for is hard. As Hebrews says, we know God, but only in a varied and fragmentary way and we constantly seem to have to rediscover faith. This is what is at heart the issue in the controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus in Mark's gospel. Jesus' questioners are pedantic, competitive people who want to argue about the rights and wrongs of legal issues connected with divorce. Jesus avoids their trap, shifts the argument away from divorce to God's intention in creation, and then welcomes and blesses the children. It seems like two unrelated episodes, but the one interprets the other. If we read the episode as an action it demonstrates what the kingdom of God looks like. The children come to Jesus with nothing. No expert wisdom, no superlative deeds. They had no bargaining chips to trade, nor did they have a spectacular history of failure to present. The difference between them and those who challenged Jesus was their hearts were not hard, but open and receptive. Their gift was to receive the blessing of God. The children stand for those, small in stature and those fresh in faith who willingly respond to God's reign. From them it is clear that the way to life is based, not on legalism, but on the readiness to live according to acceptance shown. In the coming weeks we may reflect on Job some more, but here it may be worth noting Job and Jesus both travelled a dark passage and allowed nothing to come between them and their faith in God. We who live in the light of Christ are able to take comfort in the knowledge we have of his resurrection, but from an outsider's point of view the hand of God was hidden in his journey as surely as it was in Job's. The cross of Christ was an ambiguous place for the presence of God to be revealed in the world, but we believe the cross of Christ joins the transcendent God with the world of pain we know. But it is worth remembering that for many people this

does not appear to be so, and the cross seems more like a strange place for God to hide. But just as Jesus' reception of the children is a sign that those with nothing are welcomed in God's embrace, the Cross witnesses that where there is tribulation and brokenness, God is present. With this in mind it becomes possible to walk in the integrity of faith even on the darkest of days. For even there, we may find God is there, and there for us.