

Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Psalm 104

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

God's reply to Job...

If you have an insurance policy on your property, you may be lucky enough to be covered against an Act of God. According to insurance law an Act of God is an inevitable, accidental or extraordinary episode in the course of events that cannot be foreseen or guarded against. Such acts are ascribed to God because they are too big and threatening for us to be held responsible.

The story of Job is that he is subjected to many extraordinary and unpredictable episodes from which he suffers greatly. This blameless, prosperous, God fearing man is being tested to see if he will compromise his faith. We know, but Job does not, that the test has been designed by Satan with the compliance of God. God holds Job in very high esteem but Satan believes Job will curse God if he loses everything. A deal has been struck and Satan is free to test Job to see if he trusts God for no reason, or whether he trusts God for some form of reward. Job loses his herds, servants and children. His three friends come to persuade him he must have done something wrong to deserve this. Job calls for God to appear and vindicate him but his friends warn him that such an appearance would most likely unmask him as an enemy of God. Job does not give in; he continues to maintain his innocence and his faith in God. His great passion is for God to appear in person so that he can put his case. He is certain that in such an encounter God will vindicate him.

It is highly presumptuous, even absurd, for Job to expect God to appear to him in person. Elihu, one of the three friends expresses the relationship correctly when he says "It is not for a mortal to set a time to come before God in litigation." According to Israelite tradition no mortal could see God and live. Job realises that if he did see God he may not survive long enough to put his case:

If I summoned him to court and he answered,
I do not believe he would hear my voice.
He would crush me with a whirlwind,
and increase my wounds without cause. (9:16-17)

The miracle is Job got what he wanted: God came to him and answered Job out of the whirlwind. This is an act of God, and it is an act of grace. But Job has to face the consequences of the encounter. He is not crushed but God turns the tables on him. Job is called to stand up and answer God's questions, rather than state his own case.

There are two marvellously poetic speeches by God in Job [38-39, 40-41]. Neither responds with any logic or reasonable argument to the questions of whether the innocent suffer unjustly or whether God rewards the righteous. And they only touch lightly on Job's complaints about carelessness in the divine governance of the world and God's failure to distinguish between the wicked and the righteous.

The reading today is from the first speech. It sounds like an attack on Job and is full of questions which compare the majesty of God's knowledge of creation with Job's paltry understanding. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?" "Surely you know who determined its measurements?" "Can you count the clouds or tilt the water skins to send rain?" "Can you see to it that the young lions are fed?" It is worth reading the whole speech to savour the rich imagery which demonstrates the wise order and depth of design in creation, God's containment of evil, the wit and incongruity of some aspects of life in the world and God's providence for its creatures. All of this serves to demonstrate **the infinite difference between God and mortals**. As compared with Genesis and the Psalms where mortals have a central and dominant role in the created order, in Job the wonders of creation are for revealing the majesty of God. The difference is significant: mortals are only a part of reality, not lord over it. In Job there is less room for **self-indulgent delusions amongst mortals** because God shows that each facet of creation is produced as a work of power and grace for itself, and even for God's enjoyment. Even the monsters of the deep, source of great terror for humans, are portrayed as the admired playthings of God. It is as though God is saying: **I am God; who do you think you are!** Job is accused of **"darkening counsel by words without knowledge;"** of speaking before he has thought, of not knowing what he was talking about.

The speeches of God challenge our imagination and faith. Poetically they ask us to imagine the unimaginable; to consider the unapproachable splendour and majesty of God as it is reflected in the natural world, and in God's mastery of the chaotic powers. The grandeur of the vision presented makes it seem all the more miraculous that God takes Job seriously enough to answer him. In this it seems that God, who has dethroned mortals from their position at the apex of the created order, nonetheless demonstrates the value and importance of humans by speaking with Job. God's answer from the whirlwind reveals God's approval of Job, but we have always known it. Ironically the bet with Satan that caused Job's troubles had its origin in God boasting to the members of the Council of Heaven about his blameless character. There is a sort of outline of grace here. God's approval came first: Job did not have to earn God's favour. The speeches show that, although it did not seem so to Job, and he could not read it from the world of nature, or from the treatment of himself or others in the world, God was always for him as he made his painful journey. Job's integrity was so highly regarded that the divine reputation was staked on it from the beginning.

There is a link with the Gospel for us to reflect on. James and John's request to sit at the right and left of Jesus in glory comes immediately after the third prediction of Jesus' suffering and death. They want power, as most people do. They think glory is on its way and they want to be in the dominant positions. But the fact is Gethsemane is just ahead, and after that Calvary. There Jesus will endure a long, dark night in which his faith and trust will be put to the test, as was Job's integrity. He is not promised rewards. There is no self-interested motive. He has only the intimacy of his relationship with God, the one he calls "Abba", whom he knows already approves of him. This intimacy allows Jesus to continue the relationship for its own sake: "to serve God for nothing."

Like Job, James and John are also told they really don't know what they are talking about. They haven't grasped what is going on so what they ask for is totally out of alignment. But it is made clear that if they intend to follow, their journey will have

some resonance with the journey Jesus made. They will share his suffering, which is what it means to drink his cup and be baptised with his baptism. When we think about our discipleship as individuals, and as a congregation, the challenge of suffering, least of all death, does not seem urgent or real. For us following Jesus is more palliative than life threatening. Palliative has its place - he offers us rest for our souls - but the suffering comes because his presence is disruptive and challenging. Because of him we are always faced with questions about what we hold sacred, what we really trust with our life, what inspires ambition, and where our desires lead. This introduces a level of awkwardness and irritation because, as his followers, the goal of life is to live out the gospel. Between this, and what we want, most people find there is a struggle. All who would follow must count this cost. The good news is that his disruptive presence is a sign that God already approves of us, and calls us to turn away from the service of lesser gods. The chance to live in the freedom of God is the gift Jesus brings to us and all people. It does come at a price. But if we can live in this, there is no need for power or domination, boasting or gloating. And there is no other surpassing glory we could have or need. For the highest thing we can be is a servant of God.