

## Insignificant?

In 1983 Monty Python sang:

Just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving  
And revolving at 900 miles an hour  
That's orbiting at 19 miles a second, so it's reckoned  
A sun that is the source of all our power

The sun and you and me and all the stars that we can see  
Are moving at a million miles a day  
In an outer spiral arm, at 40, 000 miles an hour  
Of the Galaxy we call the Milky Way

Our Galaxy itself contains 100 billion stars  
It's 100, 000 light years side to side  
It bulges in the middle, 16, 000 light years thick  
But out by us it's just 3, 000 light years wide

We're 30, 000 light years from galactic central point  
We go round every 200 million years  
And our Galaxy is only one of millions and billions  
In this amazing and expanding Universe  
As fast as it can go, at the speed of light you know  
12 million miles a minute, and that's the fastest speed there is  
So remember when you're feeling very small and insecure  
How amazingly unlikely is your birth  
And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space  
Because there's [not very much at all] all down here on Earth.

They are amazing numbers aren't they? 900 miles an hour... 40,000 miles an hour... 12 million miles a minute. Millions and billions. Then, having gone through all the numbers they reach the conclusion "How amazingly unlikely is your birth".

Given what we know about the scope of the universe, compared to the size, compared to the numbers involved, how insignificant are we? What chance do any of us have of making a difference to anything? We are, it seems, insignificant.

And I invite you to keep that in mind as we turn to our reading from the book of Job today.

Job is a difficult book to us to come to grips with. If you've been attending church for a while, you've probably picked up the gist of the story, and even if you haven't you've probably heard about the 'patience of Job'.

Job is a long book too. Last Monday I sat down and read it end-to-end. AUSGrid were replacing power poles near our street, so we had no power, it was raining so going outside was not a pleasant option. It wasn't quite the Freedom Day I'd imagine. But it was a good time to sit quietly and read the 42 chapters of Job.

The opening of the book of Job tells us "In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East." (Job 1:1-3)

There is some thought that Job is one of the oldest books in the bible – the first or one of the first written down.

We're not really sure of this 'Land of Uz' - various locations have been suggested including different parts of Jordan, Israel and Syria.

So the story of Job takes place in a time we don't know, and in a place we don't know – but we do know that Job a good man, and a wealthy man.

Having introduced us to Job, the scene changes to heaven – and the angels – including Satan – come to meet God, and God asks Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

Satan argues that Job is only blameless and upright because he has been blessed by God, and God responds by telling Satan to test him – "The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."" (Job 1:12).

And so begins Job's suffering. He loses his wealth. He loses his family. He accepts it all and doesn't blame God – or curse God – for what's happened.

Then Satan says "A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your

face.” (2:4-5) And God responds “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.”

We read that Job was afflicted with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He got a shard of pottery and scratched at his skin. But he didn’t curse God.

His wife was unimpressed “Are you still holding on to your integrity?” she asked, “Curse God and die”. (2:9)

Probably not the most sympathetic response. But then Job’s three friends arrive on the scene – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They wept at the sight of him, and they sat with him for seven days, without saying a word.

After a week, Job and his friends begin to speak. But it’s not really a conversation, it’s really a series of speeches. His friends are not helpful... they may have had the best of intentions, as we so often do when we try to help others. I think some of the things that they say to Job, will be familiar to us – both as things that have been said to us when we’ve been in dark places... and as things that we’ve said to others when they’ve needed our help and sympathy.

I read phrases like:

“Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?” (4:7)

“If you are pure and upright, even now [God] will rouse himself on your behalf...” (8:6a)

“Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?” (11:7).

...and they sound familiar. Maybe you’ve brought this on yourself – maybe it’s your fault. Maybe you need to pray more. Don’t question what God is doing – God is beyond us.

The only one missing is “God will not give us more than we can bear”... which is really a verse that Christians often take out of context. It comes from 1 Corinthians 10:13 – and it’s not about suffering, it’s about temptation – “And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

But that's just an aside. We have Job's three friends coming to give him "help", but they don't. In Job's responses to each of his friends, there is some wonderful stuff, Job acknowledges God's power and might – but also God's mercy and compassion - things that we as Christians can see clearly point to Jesus – who would live and die and rise for us:

“Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God ; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend”.(16:19-21)

“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. “(19:25)

Job certainly laments his situation: He has lost so much. He is in so much pain. He knows that God has the power to put things right. Job isn't someone who is saintly and spiritual and above these things. He is hurting and he is hurting deeply.

But despite his hurt, despite his pain, and despite his losses, and despite his certainty that God has the power to put things right, he doesn't curse God. He doesn't blame God.

Job is of course not unique in his suffering. The history of the world is the history of people suffering. At different times, in different places and in different ways.

We have suffered over the last two years because of Covid. Here in Australia, things have been much better off than in other parts of the world – but we have still suffered.

We might wonder, as Job did, if God really cares for us. He may not have cursed God, he may not have blamed God... but he certainly worried that God didn't care about his situation.

He said, “Surely, O God, you have worn me out; you have devastated my entire household....God has turned me over to evil men and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked” (16:7,11)

He asks, “Why does the Almighty not set times for judgement? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? (24:1)

We wonder: does God care?

Is Job insignificant to God? He was just one person. Are we insignificant to God? After all there's not many of us here at St Ives Uniting and there more than to seven and three quarter billion people in the world. Surely God has got bigger things on his mind than us!

In the great scheme of things, what do any of us count for? What difference can any of us make to the world? Aren't we all just insignificant people who are standing on a planet that's evolving and revolving at 900 miles an hour. That's orbiting at 19 miles a second, so it's reckoned a sun that is the source of all our power?

Well, after 35 chapters of backwards and forwards between Job and his friends, God speaks. God speaks from the cloud to the poor and insignificant Job - and he tells Job just how insignificant Job is:

“Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?..Who marked off its dimensions?... who laid its cornerstone? ...Can you raise your voice to the clouds... Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?” and so on.

And so on – and that's just a few fragments of today's reading, which in turn is just a few fragments of a four-chapter long speech from God, which sets out God's power and wisdom and authority. God doesn't tell Job about Satan being behind what had happened to him. God doesn't tell Job that his friends were wrong (although there is an epilogue (42:7-9), where we learn that God was angry with Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – and that Job himself would be part of the process of them receiving God's forgiveness).

It might seem odd that God spends four chapters telling Job about God's power and wisdom and authority because, yes, compared to God, Job is certainly insignificant and not worthy of being in his presence. But even though Job is insignificant, God speaks to him.

After all that Satan has done. After all the helpful words from his three friends. God reaches out to Job and speaks to him. Insignificant Job.

And if we go through the four chapters of God speaking, we can see much of what God says is confirming what Job said in the earlier chapters.

Job was insignificant compared to God. But Job was not insignificant to God.

This year, the lectionary has taken us through the gospel of Mark, and as we read Mark's gospel we see that Jesus repeatedly reaches out to people that would have been insignificant:

- The fishermen that became his disciples (Mark 1:14-20)
- The man with the evil spirit that came into the synagogue in Caparnaum (Mark 1:21-26)
- Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:31)
- A leper (Mark 1:40-42)
- A paralyzed man (Mark 2:1-5)
- A tax collector (Mark 2:14)
- A man with a paralyzed hand (Mark 3:5)
- A man possessed by many evil spirits (Mark 5:9)
- The daughter of a synagogue official (Mark 5:21-42)
- The haemorrhagic woman (Mark 5:25-34)
- A Syrophenician woman – a gentile! (Mark 7:25-3)
- A deaf mute man (Mark 7:31-37)
- A blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26)
- A boy with an evil spirit (Mark 9:17-29)
- The little child who Jesus placed among the disciples (Mark 9:36)
- The little children who were brought to him (Mark 10:13-16)

All insignificant. But all loved and called and/or healed by Jesus. Even though none of those people were important in the world, they were important to Jesus.

It's something that we see throughout the scriptures – the Old and the New Testaments – God reaching out to the insignificant, the weak, the small, the unlikely. And not just reaching out to them, but helping them, and healing them, and ultimately working through them.

And so we come to our gospel reading today – where John and James come to Jesus and say “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” (Mark 10:35-37)

They seem to have missed what Jesus had been showing them throughout his ministry – and in fact what he'd been telling them directly just the chapter before when, after the disciples had been arguing among themselves about who was greatest, Jesus said “...Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (Mark 9:35)

John and James were important among the disciples, along with Peter, and possibly Andrew, they were Jesus' inner circle or closest friends. But to ask for places of importance... well, that didn't fit with Jesus' ministry or his mission.

Of course, when the other ten heard about what James and John had asked, they were not happy, and we read that Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

I think we can all relate to James and John, and we can also relate to the other disciples. I think we'd all like to be important. We would all like the places of honour. We would all like the glory. But I think we also resent others who claim importance, or places of honour or glory.

I think we need to stay grounded. We need to stay humble. As someone who usually gets dressed up for church, and sometimes wears a special scarf, I need to keep in mind Jesus' words when he spoke about the pharisees as Mark records in Chapter 12 and said "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely." (Mark 12:38-40)

There is a danger in pride.

But we are all standing on a planet that's evolving and revolving at 900 miles an hour.

And very often we're feeling very small and insecure – and we know how amazingly unlikely is our birth.

When we realise how insignificant we are in cosmic terms, we despair, and we try to make ourselves feel more important. We try to make a name for ourselves like the builders of the Tower of Babel did (Genesis 11) – and just like those builders failed, so will we.

We try to claim the places of honour, but ultimately, we will fail.

I am one of more than seven billion people in the world, I am insignificant. Compared to the expanse of this amazing and expanding universe, all of us are insignificant. Compared to God, we are all insignificant. But to God, not one of us is insignificant.

God spoke to Job.

Jesus reached out to the fishermen, those possessed by evil spirits, his friend's mother-in-law, lepers, the paralysed, the tax collector, the haemorrhagic woman, the deaf mute, the blind, the little children. To me. To you. To all of us.

All of us insignificant by all the standards and measures we know... but each one of us significant to God.

Each of us loved by God.

Amen.