

Pentecost 22B, October 21st, 2018

Readings: Job 38:1-7, 34-41, Psalm 104: 1-9, 24, 35c, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

A Total Re-Think about God

Introduction

The story of Job is just a story, not fact. But, it asks inescapable questions about the world and God. In essence it asks this: how can one believe in a God of justice in an unjust world? How can one subscribe to a God of the moral, of the ethical, where innocents suffer? In the world of theology and philosophy, this problem is called "theodicy".

It was the German thinker, Hegel, a philosopher of history, as it turns out, who referred to history as a "slaughter bench", a bench where "the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals has been sacrificed". His insight has only become more accurate with time. By the time the twentieth century had closed, 70 million people in those preceding 100 years, had been uprooted, enslaved or killed: many more than in Hegel's time, which spanned the 18th and 19th centuries

In my experiences, working with Christians and atheists/agnostics in different places, I have found that neither move far beyond simple, metaphysical statements to defend their side when it comes to the question of the suffering of the innocent. Christians, for their part, especially the evangelical wing, take the line that the evil of the world can be exclusively slated back to human beings. They grasp their bible and turn to Genesis, replaying the statement that the "creation is good", or at least that is how God left it. It leads to the comfortable, clinical conclusion that God bears no responsibility for the state of the world. It draws a convenient line in the sand between God as good and people as bad. Atheists on the other hand, have the opposite take, predictably arguing that innocent suffering and injustice is *all* God's fault: that the suffering of the world lies in his purview, and ultimately remains within his power to address: if God exists that is.

Enough of the word games. Suffering, innocent suffering, unjust suffering, is much more complex than either side, Christians or atheists allow. The French writer, Albert Camus, was more honest when he said, "Human beings are to blame, but not entirely. After all, who started history?"

This morning I want to address this question of innocent suffering and God. In a few words, I want to try to shed some light upon it - for, after all we are believers, and we need to attempt to think this through. First, I want to examine the reading from Job, then turn to the Gospel, and finally draw some conclusions albeit provisional ones. To provide the definitive answer would be delusional.

Job

The story of Job is complex and passes through three stages: first, where God afflicts Job who is a hero of sorts - a righteous man; second, where Job the hero challenges God; and third where God challenges Job in return and where they agree to live and let live. Our reading today, comes toward the end of the story and involves God questioning Job.

²*Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?*

³*Now stand up straight and answer the questions I ask you.*

⁴*Were you there when I made the world?*

Who decided how large it would be?

What holds up the pillars that support the earth?

³⁴*Can you shout orders to the clouds*

Do you find food for lions to eat,

Up to this stage, Job has innocently suffered a lot - loss of family, loss of friends, loss of wealth and ill health. And here we find God's interrogation. The tone of the response, has led to different opinions. Some scholars see it as being respectful of Job in as much as God does not doubt Job's innocence; unlike his friends who cast him as guilty. But, I think that that view is open to some doubt. Certainly, God is trying to

widen Job's view of things. A wealthy man, his world was limited, unsurprisingly, focused upon himself. God points out that Job's *binah* or wisdom needs refocusing, breadth, imagination. "Job, it is not all about you". But, be that as it may – and probably Job did need to get out of his skin to see more broadly - there is something disturbing here. The famous, German psychologist, Karl Jung, who wrote a small book "Answer to Job" hits the nail on the head. He writes this: "God comes riding along, on the tempest of his almightiness and thunders at Job, this half-crushed worm. It appears that Yahweh is still intoxicated with his tremendous power, and the grandeur of his creation...He rides roughshod over Job's human dignity". I think that Jung is correct. What we find in Job is anything but a sympathetic, empathetic God. We find a God who is not really given to human suffering, but rather to the impressiveness of nature, that He created. Job would have been justified in being hurt, pained and aggrieved. Jung observes that "Job stands morally higher than Yahweh". In a sense, Jung points out, the story of Job is about *God's struggle to measure-up to human standards*. God seems unmoved by the innocent suffering of Job, unmoved by Job's unrelenting but questioning loyalty to God.

Mark – Jesus the Victim

But Jesus is where all this, changes. In Jesus, the "new dispensation", God's second act, we simply could not imagine a repeat of the Divine response given to Job. In Jesus, God *becomes humanized*, but more than just that, God becomes *the human victim*. The key point in the reading, as it often is in scripture is in the last words, the last verse. To disciples who see Jesus' work as a fast ticket to religious, political and social power, Jesus' response is utterly and unmistakably blunt: he is to serve, which means, he is willing to lose his soul, *his very identity* to rescue others. There is then a turnabout in God's own psychology, in God's very temperament. God breaks into the world in the form of Jesus, *as a protest against the God of Job*. In fact, there is more in common, between Jesus and Job, than Jesus and the God of Job: both Job and Jesus experienced dramatic rejection and isolation, both were scapegoats, both were victims. It is Job who prefigures Christ. It is Christ who casts light back upon Job

But this central confession of God as the victim cannot be understood as if it were just a proposition we read in a book. It is so difficult to grasp, so contrary to how we casually conceive of God, that it requires not just thought, but something deeper: contemplation, constant contemplation. The Jesuits of El Salvador, with whom I worked used to say, "God is to be contemplated and practised". But then they would add, "better that God the victim, is contemplated and practised".

Last Sunday, October 14th, Oscar Romero, former Archbishop of San Salvador was canonised, made a saint by Pope Francis I, in Rome. For Romero, contemplation was central to his spiritual life. Romero contemplated the victim God and lost his life because of it: executed by death squads for his defence of human rights in 1979. The victim dies so the other may live. As he used to say, "The Glory of God is a living human being"

From Job to Mark, there is a 180-degree change, a sea-change in God's own way of being.

Thanks be to God!