



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: [Job 23:1-2](#) 13 October 2024

There's an old story about a Master who has 4 students. At the end of every week, he shows his appreciation of his students by giving them with a little treat, a small cake or a sweet. One Friday, as they were about to get their usual treat, the Master announces that he only has 3 cakes. And poses the following question to his students: "would you like me to divide these according to human justice or divine justice?" They eagerly debate amongst themselves and finally reply as one: "divide them according to divine justice". So, the old Master gets up, hands all the cakes to one of the students and slaps the others across the face.

More often than not, divine justice seems unjust. Suffering seems unjust.

How do you deal with that?

The book of Job deals with that precise question. The book so far:

Job is a righteous man, with family, plenty of children and wealth. God allows Satan to test Job, and his life becomes a misery. First, he loses his family and fortune. Then he loses his health. Then 3 friends come to console him, and at first, they do that. They just sit with him in silence in his grief. Eventually Job cries out to God. Then the friends pile in in rebuking him and telling him to repent from whatever sins he must have done, as his suffering is "obviously" a sign of his sinning. The more Job insists he did nothing wrong (and he didn't), the more they each dig into their positions and react with blame. The argument escalates. By the time we get to Chapter 23 (today's reading), they're onto their 3rd round of accusation and Job's self-defence returns.

Listen to the beginning of Chapter 23 again, but this time in the Message Translation:

"I'm not letting up—I'm standing my ground.
My complaint is legitimate.
God has no right to treat me like this—
it isn't fair!

Job 23:1-2 (Message)

Job cries out to God relentlessly: I am suffering without just cause. It isn't fair! We are all used to suffering, it's part of the human condition. It's not suffering that bothers us, it's undeserved suffering. Job's insistence on his innocence and his demand for a direct answer from God, reflect a profound sense of justice within him but also a deep relationship with God.

He does not curse God, as his wife suggests at one point, as that would be trying to get rid of the problem by getting rid of God, but neither does he accept easy answers, which is what his friends provide him with. Instead, he seeks a deeper understanding, which ultimately, later in the book, leads him to a greater awareness of the mystery of God.

But notice that his very human centred question: “why is this happening to me? Why should a righteous human suffer?” Doesn’t get an answer from God, whose perspective encompasses the whole cosmos, not just humans...

So, how does Job deal with his suffering? He rages directly at God, he doesn’t hide in false modesty or false piety, he brings his true self, in all his despair, grief, confusion and fear to God. He trusts God with these massive emotions which threaten to tear him apart. He is mad at God, but he continues to seek him and tries to engage with him.

What role do you allow God in your suffering? Have you consider doing it Job’s way?

But the story of Job isn’t just about him, there are also his three friends. Let us not be too quick to malign these friends. They are not “so-called” friends. They really are his friends. The reason they become critical of him, insisting that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering, is simply because this is the worldview they were shaped by. Not reacting this way would feel like betraying their own sense of self and their identity. The dynamic between Job and his friends is a poignant reminder to us about how sometimes, we too react to others’ pain with judgment rather than empathy. This isn’t usually out of malice; it is often out of compassion. We don’t like to see people suffer. And so, our instinct is to alleviate suffering. This isn’t a bad instinct. But there is a fine line between wanting to alleviate suffering and presuming we can fix things, people or situations. We may look at our suffering friends and imagine how they could have better marriages, better behaved children, better mental and emotional health. But keep the following things in mind:

1. no matter how insightful we may be, we don't really understand the full nature of our friends’ problems.
2. our friends may not want our advice.
3. it is possible that when our friends go through suffering, their lives can be transformed, deepened, marked with beauty and holiness, and remarkable ways that could never have been anticipated before the suffering.

It may be that our best course of action, may be to not come in with all the answers, but perhaps being the one who can sit with the suffering, participating in so far as we are able, entering the mystery and looking for God in it.

Job challenges us to consider how we respond to suffering—both our own and that of others. The idea that suffering can bring us closer to God, transforming our lives in unexpected ways, is a powerful message for us to hear.

But a note of warning, Job did not use his faith to avoid his pain; that’s called Spiritual Bypass, a concept introduced by John Welwood, a Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist. Spiritual bypass is a tendency to use spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with unresolved emotional issues and psychological wounds. Job did not use his connection with God to escape the reality of his suffering, on the contrary, he used it to do the hard work of facing his pain and the healing he needed. He brought his pain directly to God. He demanded answers and refused to accept easy explanations.

Job’s story teaches us that it is okay to voice our pain and confusion, to seek answers, and to demand justice. It is a reminder that our relationship with God can and should include honest

dialogue, even when it is filled with anguish. True spiritual growth comes from facing our suffering head-on, bringing it into our relationship with God, and allowing it to transform us.

God can handle your toughest questions and deepest pain. Trust him with them.

Amen.

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