

Fifth Sunday Year B

Job 7:1-7, I Corinthians 9, Mark 1:29-39

Fr Peter Groves

An interesting piece of commentary in *The Times* last week bewailed the lack of public intellectuals in our lives. Knowing quite a few academics who would like to be thought of as public intellectuals, I didn't entirely share the views expressed. But in a time of crisis such as we have endured for the last year, there is a need for informed discussion of difficult issues, not least from those who call themselves Christians. One of the absences which the article noted was an absence of bishops reflecting on the world's problems. A generally sensible response from the Bishop of Worcester the next day could not, of course, say what we all know to be true: that to have bishops as public intellectuals we need first to have bishops who are intellectuals.

This morning we heard from the Bible's most celebrated discussion of the problem of evil and suffering. The Book of Job is one of the most discussed

texts of the ancient world, and also, perhaps, the scriptural text which confuses scholars most completely; it seems not to make sense. A reading of its forty-two chapters might leave us drawing any of several possible conclusions about innocent suffering and the relationship of God to the world. It is easier to say what the Book of Job is not, than what it is, and it is certainly not an exercise in theodicy, in justifying God through rational argument. It is rather a poetic theological reflection which is designed to leave us pondering.

There are two contrasting pictures of its central character, Job: the prose sections at the beginning and the end of the book present us with a worthy, pious, accepting and patient man who calmly receives all the evil which the Lord throws at him, whilst the many poetic passages which find Job in debate with his so-called comforters present him as a miserable, broken, doom-laden man who has nothing positive left to say about the drudgery which is human life.

This morning's excerpt falls squarely into the negative side of the contrast.

"Has not man a hard service upon earth,
and are not his days like the days of a hireling?"

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,
and come to their end without hope.

Remember that my life is a breath;
my eye will never again see good."

Job is answering his so called comforters. The argument begins with Job bewailing his suffering – let the day perish wherein I was born – and hearing the answer: your suffering must be the just reward for your own wrongdoing. Of course, we know otherwise – Job is blameless before the Lord, and Satan is allowed to test him precisely because of his virtue. But here in the poetic passages Job responds to his comforter by ignoring him, continuing to rhapsodise on his misery and affliction, making it clear that those who seek to

help him do not begin to understand the depth of his anguish.

Job's protestations are only finally answered by the Lord who speaks twice out of the whirlwind, upbraiding Job for questioning his creator and stating what ought to be the obvious fact that the Lord, the God of Israel who made the heavens and the earth, answers to no human questioning. However, careful attention to what the Lord has to say reveals that he does not in fact answer Job at all, he simply tells him to shut up, and his droning on about having conquered sea monsters and formed the world out of chaos rather palls if one is seeking any kind of sensitivity in the face of all the unbearable things which have befallen Job – the loss of his family, his livelihood and his physical wellbeing.

The refusal of the text to provide Job with an answer tells us that we are not dealing with theodicy. And the inadequacy even of the words put into the mouth of the Lord, suggests something about the very idea of

rationalizing suffering: perhaps it is fruitless. Those who do attempt it – Job’s comforters – both sound and seem foolish and inept. The Job who is patient and pious, and the Job who rages against his unjust lot, are both representatives of all of God’s people.

There is something about the answer from on high which, by its failure, points us in a new direction. Mark’s gospel shows Jesus as a celebrity, the focus of the whole town, receiving the wants and the needs of all who are sick in body, mind and spirit. But his presence, not his fame, is what matters. Jesus’ being in the midst of suffering brings about restoration and healing. His work, the will of God, is to be among them, to share and to transform from within. Likewise, when Paul is commending his authority of the Corinthians, he does so because he is among them as one of them. Paul is sent not just by Christ, but as Christ: he is the imitator of Christ who does not smite with answers out of the whirlwind, does not deliberate over or rationalize the questions of human suffering, but instead chooses to live them for himself.

And this, I think, is how we as Christians should think about answering the so-called problem of evil. When we use the English word answer, we are all too apt to mean the English word “solution”. But God’s answer to the problem of suffering is not a solution, not a rational attempt to explain it away. Any justification of the existence of suffering cannot but be a failure to take it wholly seriously, diminishing it as if something else makes it OK. Instead we are called to acknowledge suffering by identifying ourselves with the sufferer. And this is precisely what God does. He does not offer a solution, but a response. A response in the person of Jesus Christ who is the person of God himself. We should rage at suffering and evil, just as Christ did. And we should trust in the mercy and goodness of God. Just as Christ did.

An essential truth of the doctrine of the incarnation is that God is not remote. God does not dwell in the sky, or in the deep or in the whirlwind. The inadequacy of Job’s comforters, convinced that they must be able to

rationalize the ways of God, is matched by the distant refusal of the Lord to engage with Job. The answer from the whirlwind is no answer at all. Instead of this picture, the gospels present God among us, not so much answering as doing, living the reality of human suffering and taking our anger upon himself. But more than this, the incarnation shows us that the reality of being human – the contradiction of Job’s patience with his raging, the two different directions from which we can all view the world – those opposites are something assumed by God himself, not to be judged on one side or the other, but to be embraced, endured and overcome. And when these opposing directions are merged, God shows us the consequence of holding them together. That consequence is a cross.