



Trinity 4

THE NEW SHOFAR

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Job 38:1-11 - Mark 4:35-41

Job the steadfast

While the King James New Testament speaks of *the patience of Job* (James 5:11), he is anything but patient in the Book of Job itself. Indeed, most modern translations come closer to the mark when they speak of the *steadfastness of Job*. The Book is an exploration of questions associated with the traditional Jewish understanding of the justice of God: does God punish the wicked and protect/reward the just? The answer according to Jewish biblical understanding is clear: God is always “just”. A just God would ensure evil people reap the reward of their wickedness and at the same time, come to the assistance of the righteous God-fearing believer and reward them.

The problem for any believer, Jew or Christian, is that bad things happen to good people. This is the story of Job. He was a good man, righteous in the experience of his own family and community members and holy in the eyes of the God he worshiped and obeyed. And yet everything he had was taken from him – his family, his wealth, his friends and finally his health. He is left sitting on a dung heap bemoaning his lot in life. There could be only two answers to this problem. Either Job was a secret sinner, or, alternatively, God was not just. Surely a man as good and law abiding as Job deserved a better life than the one he was having there on his dung heap?

Why did I not die as soon as I was born? Why not die in the womb?

Job’s friends preach to him about the justice of God, the way their God cares for those who obey him...*Believe me* says Bidal his friend, *God neither spurns a stainless person nor lends his aid to the evil*. Job follows through this theme and challenges Jewish thinking on the nature of their relationship with God and what they can and cannot demand of God. Do believers have the right to expect a smooth, trouble-free life? What is the point in believing in God, in following the divine laws if there is no clear reward in the present life, if everything is about what may or may not happen in the next life, after death? Is there a point in being alive if life is filled with suffering, misery and fear, ending after only a few short years? Should faith make our lives easier than the lives of unbelievers?

The shock value of this particular book is the way Job (and this is revealed only at the end of the Book) dismisses this kind of understanding as being far too simplistic. For him the question is not about God at all. There can be no doubting the absolute power of God, a message proclaimed in the opening lines of our reading...*where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?* The reality is that men and women are weak and fragile human beings. We are not indestructible, not perfect in every way. We get sick, we grow old, we have accidents and we die. Sometimes we die very young or even before we leave our mother’s womb. That is the human reality and in the face of this reality we have an eternal, omnipotent God who loves us in our weakness. That’s the faith challenge.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghgod.com

Being steadfast is what enables us to find “peace”

What makes Job such a significant biblical figure is not the way he endured suffering with great *patience*. He was far from being a patient man. He argued against God, went into battle against the standard ways of thinking. He claimed God was unjust, that life was nothing but pain and misery and then it was over. What was the point of living righteously in the vain hope that God would protect you from all of the horrible things that can beset even the holiest of men and women? Is it not better to eat, drink and make merry, for tomorrow you might die?

Throughout all of this the reader is shown how God was never far from Job’s side. On the one hand the prophet could say *I stand before you and you do not notice* and at the same time maintain God was a God who could hear him. His steadfastness in faith is what enables him to see beyond the present loss and suffering, to persevere despite the darkness, uncertainty and fear. When he is reminded of the absolute and immense power of God, the enduring love God has for all created by the divine hands, he falls to his knees and *in dust and ashes I repent*.

In discovering Yahweh God there alongside him *in* his suffering, *as* he suffered, he found peace. He understood the reality of his *nothingness* and the way the fullness of his identity was not to be found in what he could achieve, build up or create in his time on this earth. The fullness of his humanity, the meaning to life is to be found in God and not in the self. Job articulates this enduring reality, one that does not change according to individual human circumstances: God is the God of eternity and this God wills for men and women to share in this divine life. To die at week twenty our mother’s womb or to live to be one hundred and ten says nothing about our value. What gives us value and offers meaning in life is God and a human existence under the divine rule. Everything else is but cream, cream that can be here today and sour tomorrow.

Let us go to the other side of the lake

Mark’s Gospel today offers an insight into the message of Job. Jesus and his disciples are heading to the other side of the Lake of Galilee. That is not a long trip. It should be easy with so many experienced fishermen with them. They can see their destination clearly ahead of them. This apparently simple excursion is then threatened by one of those common enough experiences – a storm. So great is the storm and so impotent do these disciples feel they eventually cry out to Jesus in their fear. Mark understands this as the human condition, it is our understanding of the reality of life. There are many times when we feel we know where we are heading, can “see” our destination before us. We are confident in having the skills we need to achieve our goals and do not even bother to question our decision to travel when the weather looks dicey.

All of that is shattered by something that happens “all the time” to the lake’s sailors. A storm. Despite the strong boat, the tricks we try and our experiences in sailing, we are powerless before these mighty forces and now face death. In that situation the very last thing from our lips is *don’t you care God?* Is that us? “Are we like these disciples?” is what Mark is asking.

Where was Jesus in their moment of crisis?

The most important reality in this desperate situation was the one they forgot, the one to which they turned only when everything else had been tried and had failed. Their hope, their salvation was there with them in the midst of the storm. They had all seen the mighty power of God that flowed through Jesus but still exhausted everything else before turning to him.

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