

IDENTIFYING WITH THE WEAK

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Job 7: 1-7, Psalm 147: 1-11, N.T: 1Cor 9:16-23, Gospel: Mark 1: 29-39.

The book of Job, from which our first reading was taken this morning, grapples with the age-old question, which of course people still ask: ‘*if God is just and good, why do innocent people have to suffer?*’. As a person, Job is really good: about as good as anyone can hope to be. Yet calamity overwhelms him. The loss of his possessions and his family is followed by the loss of his health, a prolonged physical suffering that shakes his faith to the depths. In those days, and even today, prosperity was seen as God’s reward for good living, and calamity was God’s judgement on the sin of the person. Even today, suffering people find that this book speaks to their need more than any other book in the Bible.

The passage we read, is part of Job’s reflection on his own situation. He laments the drudgery of his present life; he is covered with sores, frustrated and angry, and cannot see how he may have deserved such sufferings. He compares his life to military service, to a minimum-wage labourer, and to slavery, with no escape, and no future. When this book was written, the Jews did not yet have belief in a future life where good would be rewarded and evil punished. We see here a longing for something better, but the goal is never achieved, and time passing is seen as meaningless and empty. These images of time are situated in the blackness of a long sleepless night, spent in grief, waiting for the morning... and when morning comes, Job can only wait for the night again. He sees nothing of value in life, no future, no hope, no joy. At least we can see that Job had the courage to name his experience honestly, and he did not hide from the black emptiness through denial, or any other defence mechanisms. He expressed it as it was. Sometimes we too can be overwhelmed by the misery of human existence, and find ourselves asking: ‘Does God care?’ or even: ‘Can there possibly be a God?’ What Job is saying here is probably what all of us have expressed from time to time... about how awful and difficult life can be.... It is a universal cry, really, from the depths of the human heart. Job’s powerful image of his days being ‘swifter than a weaver’s shuttle’ stresses the transience of human life. In our busy modern world, where speed and instant gratification are paramount, we can relate to that. If you try to look back on your busy day, in a time of quiet prayer and reflection, it is amazing how many fast images will flash through your mind. There is so much happening around us that sometimes we hardly notice it, and new technology has a way of continually making things happen even faster! Which can leave us with a sense of disquiet... a need for space, to have more time to be still, to listen to God. And the more we rush about, the more difficult it seems to be to make these spaces in life, to recognise what is valuable and life-giving for us.

The Psalm we read, in contrast to the Job passage, seems to have been written to help restore the returned exiles’ confidence in God. They were struggling to get their community life and religious worship back to normal, and the poet points to the healing and restoring hand of God. God heals, God binds up the broken-hearted...he is still the great Creator, who will help the desolate and wounded, and find those who are lost, who will sustain his people, and give them peace.

Then we listened to the New Testament reading, Paul's joy and enthusiasm in preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to everybody he can find. The message he brings is that the love of God is for absolutely everyone... this is why he insists that he has no grounds for boasting... it is something he HAS to do! (and woe to me if I don't do this, he says...) it is a joyful obligation, he MUST do it, freely, for everybody... he says that he became weak for weak people, in order to convert the weak... and he has become all things for everybody, in order in every way to bring salvation to some.... *Everything* he does, is for the sake of the Gospel. Paul has received such an amazing gift that he longs to share it. The Cross is his central message, and the Love of God in Christ. We too, have been offered this gift, and we need to share it too, or it will not grow in us. Finally we find in Mark's Gospel, a story about the close of the first day of Jesus' ministry. He had just preached in the synagogue, and healed a man possessed by demons, both public demonstrations of power. Now they come to Simon Peter's house where Simon's mother-in-law is sick in bed, and we see, in a small setting, away from the crowds, this miraculous healing gift of Jesus... no word spoken, no fanfare... just a touch, a holding of the hand. Perhaps this woman had felt resentment against Jesus... maybe she had not met him before.... She may well have been anxious that Simon and Andrew had abandoned their fishing boats to follow the strange itinerant preacher...how would they make their living now? Maybe she was afraid of the future, where the food would come from, for the family. But when Jesus comes to her, she experiences love, knowledge, and deep understanding... she is touched in her soul... and instantly healed. What is her response? She gets up, and begins to serve Him, and His friends. Mark's gospel speaks of many sick and possessed people being brought to Jesus... he heals them all... crowds come around, asking for help, trusting and believing, showing their vulnerability.... Jesus has compassion for each person.

Then we are told: ' In the morning, while it was still very dark...He got up, and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed'. But Simon and his friends track him down, and interrupt him...they obviously think this prayer business is rather overrated, and that Jesus should be getting on with his work! Jesus doesn't seem to be irritated at the interruption. He is aware of the dangers of basking in the adoration of the crowds. Perhaps this prayerful union with his Father is what strengthens him to leave Capernaum, where he is welcomed, and move on to take the Gospel to other places, where he may not be so welcomed. Jesus knew that crowds are fickle, and that he would soon see them dwindle and fade when the real challenges of the Kingdom presented themselves. When we think of worldly popularity, perhaps we see enthusiastic crowds following their idols...Right now, it is cricketers.... World Cup fever!! Rugby players, footballers, and tennis players, pop-groups, film stars, tycoons, all attract followers, or 'fan-clubs'. All have one thing in common, *their power to attract people depends on their performance*, on their ability to entertain and impress people. It is transient, as many have discovered, to their cost.

The source of Jesus' power and mission was kept alive and fully charged always by prayer, constant communication with His Father, the Source of all power. The closeness of that relationship was his great strength. So it needs to be, for us. Today, of course, Jesus is still able to heal us, forgive us, and strengthen us for service. I believe he asks us to bring this healing to others... and he set us the example of the prayerful life. If we can, through prayer, through making the spaces in our lives for a deeper awareness of God's love and the presence of Jesus with us and in us, come

closer to God, we will experience a greater vulnerability in ourselves. Through this deeper relationship, we may become more humble, more persevering, more patient, and more compassionate. And we will experience a greater desire to serve Him. We need to ask God today to help us in this ongoing relationship.... so that we may bring joy to others, through our healing words (so often we tend to use destructive words when we could offer encouragement!) Can we keep asking for continuing grace to forgive those who hurt or damage us...? Can we bring hope, rather than despair? In this time of 'war talk' and indeed the actuality of war in our continent and our world, can we be those who bring Christ's peace, first to one another and then to our wider community? To do this, we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable before one another, and before God.

I would like to end with words of St. Ignatius of Loyola:

'If we are to be followers of His way, then our greatness is measured not just by our service to the powerless, but by our total identification with them. We are to become one with their feelings, their thoughts, their reality. When we do this, we become as little children: open, vulnerable, and trusting, a terrifying prospect for any of us raised to survive as the fittest. But it is our call, our task as Christians.... To be a servant people, a servant church, like children in our openness to others, like children in our vulnerability to others, like children in our trust in others: we are to become like the ones we serve. And the promise is that when we live like this, we will release something very deep and personal, something that has been within us from our own childhood: We will release God within, transforming the world with our vulnerable greatness.'

Amen.