

Lent 1
21/2/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Job 42:1-6
Psalm 25
Mark 1:9-15
Job crucified

In a sentence
In Jesus the experience of Job is shown to be God's very own.

One of the reasons the book of Job has been held in such high regard for the last 2500 years is that we see ourselves in him and his experiences. This is undoubtedly the right thing to do.

By contrast, we don't identify so directly with the figure of Jesus. We know – faithful confessors of the faith that we are! – that Jesus is 'one of us', that he 'became truly human', as we will later recite in the Creed. Yet, Jesus is still experienced as rather distant from us-in-Job, at least in the telling of the story.

We began our reflections on Job by drawing a connection – and quite a strong one – between Job and Jesus. This connection is suggested, in part, by what we called the comic narrative arc reflected in the fall and rise of their two stories. Beyond that, there are many things said about Job, which happen to him or which he does, which have clear echoes in the ministry of Jesus. Observing the intercommunication of Job and Jesus is the main reason for looking to Job in this Lenten season.

But if there is this association, what are we to do with our differing experiences of these two figures?

The perennial interest Job generates for us has to do with the sense that, despite its clear historical location, his is a contemporary story. What he experiences and says could be said by any one of us. Job is a person not only of his own time but also of ours. Job's tale recurs right down through history to the here and now of our very own lives.

By contrast, Jesus is not typically experienced in that way. What happens to us here and now is less something which happens to Jesus than it is something with which Jesus might 'help' us. It doesn't go too far to say that we tend to experience Job as with us, whereas Jesus is cast as in some way ahead of us. We sit with Job but we are to follow Jesus.

And yet, perhaps Job is less with us than at first we imagine. We resonate with the pained righteousness of Job's 'Why me?', but much stranger to us is where Job ends up. By this, I mean not the 'unrealistic' restoration of Job at the very end of the book but his humble repentance, as we've heard it today.

Can we who love Job because he asks our questions still love him when, in the face of the mighty God of the whirlwind, he acquiesces and repents in dust and ashes? 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear', Job says, 'but now my eyes see you'.

What!?

I suggested last week that the restoration of Job's former abundance at the end of the story might be more problematic than the divine game which caused his suffering. Yet perhaps Job's repentance is more problematic than his restoration, not least because it is the climax of the story.

Does not Job now move ahead of us in our suffering? Are we not now called to follow, to set aside Job's rage in ourselves and repent with him? Is not Job's strange answer to God to be our answer as well? And if Job's response is not enough for us, does not Job, who was so familiar, now become strange? If we previously felt that Job was with us, as distinct from the Jesus who is ahead of us, Job now looks rather Jesus-like: no longer where we are but somewhere out in front.

Jesus out-in-front is who we seem to meet in our Gospel reading today. This is the beginnings of Jesus' ministry, marked with his programmatic, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' On our comparison of Jesus and Job, this declaration and command could be the word of Job's God out of the whirlwind, which brings about Job's own repentance. We might say, then, that Job rises to Jesus' call to repent and believe – that his repentance is the repentance for which Jesus calls.

This is difficult. And if Jesus is ahead of us, and Job leaves us behind to follow him, where does that leave us who feel we can't 'repent' with Job?

If Jesus is already out ahead of us, and Job has now also moved ahead Jesus-like, we are nevertheless not left alone. What becomes apparent when we continue to press the relationship between Job and Jesus is that, if it is the case that Job in his repentance moves away from us, Jesus moves towards us. Or, we might say, Jesus begins to become more Job-like.

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'. This is about as distant from us as Jesus could be. Yet, with ears still ringing from that divine embrace, Jesus is then 'driven' into the desert of human experience, culminating in the cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Is this not the reverberating echo of the whole lament of Job? Is not Jesus now become Job? Job, in whose suffering and questionings we see our own, now suffers on the cross. This is to say that Jesus' journey to the cross is our own journey to the cross, the filling out of our own Job-like existence.

And yet, Jesus is not only us-in-Job. He is also the Son, the Beloved, and no less so because of the crucifixion. The cross, then, becomes a convergence of our Job-like experience of suffering with God's own experience of suffering in the Son. We 'coincide' with God on the cross.

These are not easy thoughts, and if you're having trouble following them, so am I!

But if we are to take ourselves seriously – including our resonance with Job – and to take also the story of Jesus seriously as a culmination in God's story, these are the kinds of things we are pressed to think.

These are no simple thoughts because what we are unpacking here are not steps towards an 'explanation' of who we are and why we might reasonably expect a happy ending for ourselves, now or in some afterlife. We will not discover a logical key which opens up resurrection and leaves Job and the cross behind, as both the end of the Job and Easter might seem to do.

Technically, what we have here is a ‘mystery’ – not a problem to be solved but a sheer givenness, in this case the coincidence of God and human being on the cross, and the revelation there of God’s convergence with us, the coming near of God’s reign in the place of godlessness. Mysteries are for contemplation, not for solving.

Job on the cross of the divine Son is not an argument but an occasion for pause. There are no clues in the world to unravel them for us; they are rather clues for unravelling the world. Repentance – whether that of Job or that which Jesus calls for, is not the outcome of a careful argument. Nothing has been proven, not by God’s response to Job out of the whirlwind or even by the miracles of Jesus as responses to those who ask the questions of need. And we might also say in passing that our suffering proves nothing with respect to God, surely one of the clearest things Job’s story has to tell us.

But still the unprovable mystery is asserted: our story and God’s story converge. They converge in the cross but also – just because of this – they converge in the resurrection. This life-in-connection-with-death is the basis of the proposal of last week – that the life of the Christian is a to be lived as if it were a comedy, as if what we see now is but passing, as if there is a deeper secret we know about our whence and hence. This does not give ‘meaning’ to what suffering might be ours now – or to what joy – but it sets our experience in a broader vision.

To repent and believe the good news is to hold that, in all things, God convergences on us – whether our hearts are lifted in this or that joy or weighed down with this or that pain or grief. Jesus’ path to the cross is his path to us, the path of the LORD which is – in the words of our psalm today – always the path of steadfast love and faithfulness.

Steadfast love and faithfulness is God’s gift, and God’s call.

Let us, then, receive God coming to us on this path, in repentance and faith, with Job and all the saints.
