

Transfiguration
14/2/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Job 1:1-12
Psalm 126
Mark 9:2-9

Job: A Divine Comedy

Jim Carey is not everyone's favourite actor but what he does he does well – playing the part of the happy-all-is-well punter whose life is suddenly sent into tailspin, as any theatrical comedy begins.

Consider the opening scenes of one of his movies Mr Popper's Penguins. The hopeful innocence of the young Popper gives way to the charismatic confidence of a New York developer, who seals a difficult property purchase and sets himself up for partnership in the firm. There's a grey cloud here and there on the horizon but nothing Popper can't handle until there arrives at his door a couple of crates from his just deceased father: 6 live penguins in a New York apartment.

And so the downward spiral begins, with disaster following crisis following catastrophe until, by some unexpected means, balance is restored and so too is the protagonist.

Compare this now to the beginning of Job

¹There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job... ²There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. ⁴His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt-offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

With the right soundtrack and a sufficiently silly grin on his face, the start of the book of Job could be the start of Mr Popper's penguins. Then begins Job's own downward spiral. A conversation in the heavenly court sees the floor drop out from under Job's happy, secure life, and down he goes. He spends quite a while in the depths before his life is finally restored.

There is nothing at all *funny* about what happens to Job, but the story as a whole itself is *comic*, in that it follows *the same narrative arc* as any comedy we might see in a theatre. As Popper's life is shaken to its roots by a flock of penguins but is then restored at the end with a reconciliation to all which has happened to him, so also is the life of Job. If there is *one* thing we might take away from this series of reflections on Job, perhaps it could be that the book of Job is a *comedy*.

Of course, it is almost offensive to speak of Job as a comedy, given what we usually associate with comedy and what Job himself experiences. Must we not take seriously what he experiences, and what many of us have experienced, or are experiencing right now?

Indeed, but the point of noting the comic structure of the book is not to dismiss what happens to Job; it is to set it in context. The comic narrative arc is the basic story structure of the Scriptures themselves. Last week we heard something of the beginnings of Jesus' public ministry, according to St Mark.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John... That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons... And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

This could be the start of the book of Job, or another Jim Carey movie! Jesus is on the field and kicking goals. And, of course, the gospel then follows the comic narrative arc – from the joyful heights of Jesus' early ministry to the depths of the cross to the even greater height of the resurrection.

In fact, the whole sweep of the Scriptures follows the same pattern, from the creation story of Adam and Eve through the expulsion from Paradise and the long struggle back to the promised restoration in the book of Revelation. *The Bible as a whole is a comedy*, and so are the leading stories within it. There are – of course – great depths of suffering and loss and despair in the Scriptures, but there is never really *tragedy* – that narrative arc which also falls but never rises again. Where things are looking catastrophic, *irony* is in play: not tragic finality but the confidence that there is more going on than meets the eye.

Recognising the comic structure of Job will not make all the tensions in the text go away. Indeed, if we were to take seriously the history of attempts to come to grips with the book, we should not expect that we will resolve these tensions in a few sermons, or ever.

But to see the comic structure of the story, and its correspondence to the comedy which is the whole Scriptural narrative, is to open up possibilities that might have been hidden from us. That the book moves in the same way as the rest of the Scriptures reveals that Job does not stand alone. The book is part of a larger whole: contributing to it, drawing from, reflecting it.

At the heart of that scriptural whole, from a Christian perspective, is Jesus of Nazareth. Today is Transfiguration, and each year the Gospel reading highlights on this day a strange revelation of the identity of Jesus to his disciples upon a mountaintop. Learning that they must see Jesus in the light of the law and the prophets, the disciples hear from the heavens comes the declaration and directive, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.'

This declaration is not far from Job. 'Have you considered my servant Job?' God asks the Accuser. 'There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' The correspondence between the comedy of Job and the comedy of the gospel make the end of Job's story and the Resurrection of Jesus the same kind of thing. Job and Jesus are 'kind of' the same figure.

And so Job's story is not told as mere history about what happened to happen to one person. As we read his story, reflecting as it does the comic arc of all of the Scripture, we are invited to allow his story to be our own. For many of us, this is easy enough, at least that part of the story in which we are first happy and then suddenly we are not.

And this brings us to what is perhaps even more confronting than the bargain God strikes with the Accuser to attack Job: the very end of the story and final restoration to Job of even more than he lost at the beginning. This is confronting because we know that this is not the usual way of things.

And suddenly the nature of faith is revealed in a new light.

We can imagine that we *were* blessed and we know that we *are* suffering – as did Job. But we don't – 'really' – expect things to get better; what happened to Job in the beginning and in the course of his suffering feels like 'knowledge' but what happens at the end feels like 'belief'. It seems we *know* that life is struggle, yet we 'only' *believe* that all will be resolved.

Job's happy – 'comic' – ending, then, challenges us with the same question at the heart of Christian conviction, the question of faith itself: Do we hold our lives ultimately to be tragedies or comedies?

Not to put too fine a point on it, Christians are comedians. This is not a reference to how funny we might happen to be to each other or to the rest of the world. It is a reference to how we are to read our world and our lives in it. There is no shortage of the passingly tragic, breaking our hearts and the hearts of others. And there is no guarantee that any one of us will die happy and content, whatever else the end of Job's story seems to imply.

The comedy of Christian existence is found in the confidence that there is more going on than we can see. When we sit down to watch a funny movie we know, whatever happens along the way, that everything will be happily resolved. If it is a *good* comedy, then we have no idea how it will resolve until the end; we know only that it *will*. We might take a perverse pleasure in the grimaces and groans of the protagonist but we might also – were it possible – assure him that it will be OK. For the antics of the comic actor are less about the immediate discomfort than they are about what it *means*: will not my life be tragedy, for surely this catastrophe is insurmountable?

We have heard that all the world is a stage; if that is the case, faith expects the show to be a comedy. In view of that expectation, faith acts against the hopeless and tragic narratives which clamour to have us play our sad part.

We align our lives neither to the tragedy of approaching death nor to a bland steady state of eternity but to the promise in Job and Jesus.

'There once was a man in the land of Uz named Job'. There once was a man in Nazareth. And somewhere between these two the promise realised in both their lives is a woman in Melbourne, and a child in Cairo, and a man in Beijing: you and I.

Have you considered my servants, God asks the Accuser? They are my Beloved, all.

I have made them, I love them, and I will restore them as mine and myself as theirs. And then will our mouths be filled with laughter, and our tongues with joy.
