

Sermon for 7th October 2018. Readings: Job 1.1; 2.1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16

The first reading today from the book of Job is part of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. Wisdom Writings focus on personal experience related through stories of different characters and their relationship to the divine and thus provides us with a different perspective to other books in the Old Testament that focus on the nation Israel, and their covenantal law and practices that binds them to God.

If we remember last week the story focused on Esther and Mordecai, this week we delve into the life of Job and his personal troubles – and there are a few – and how he responds to these in his relationship with God and his friends.

The book of Job delivers a couple of important messages to the faithful. It actually denies the inevitability of reward for living an upright life, and it decisively refutes the idea that human suffering is always deserved.

In the story, the 3 friends of Job who come to comfort him defend the traditional view of God in relation to humanity. They believe in divine retribution. In other words, if you make mistakes you will be punished and if you do good works, you will be rewarded.

Their perception of God is that God is to be studied and analysed as a subject. God is to be predicted and understood: they forget they are dealing with the incomprehensible.

Only Job is constantly yearning for a more intimate and permanent relationship with God, based not on the mere exchange of gifts or services but purely on a communion of love.

Job constantly searches his innocence and understands that he can hold up his rightness to debate his friends, but he can make no claim on God—he can't demand that God repay him because he is righteous.

Christ makes this same point in Luke 17.10 “When you have done all things that you have been commanded, say, “We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.”

In the story of Job, Job is the only one who talks to God. The intimacy in which he lives is an integral part of the overall theme of the book that God trusts in those who live in him in love.

The psalm today is an individual lament. It is based on the biblical theory of divine retribution—yet the psalter shows that this expectation is not always fulfilled.

The gospel reading speaks about Jesus holding fast to God's intention for union, for oneness in relationship with each other, as against the way of separation.

This all comes about through the specific question by the Pharisees and put to Jesus about the legality for a man to divorce his wife.

Much transpires in Jesus encounter with the Pharisees as well as with the follow up discussion with his disciples: firstly through the wording of the Pharisees question, their bias for separation is evident. Indeed their system separates the world into the two realms - clean and the unclean and women were particularly disadvantaged by the laws of separation.

In his response to their question, Jesus holds to the natural order of things in God's rule that is unifying rather than separating, and he quotes the ordinance from genesis 1; 27 that God made them male and female and both leave their families and become one flesh.

Jesus proclaims that the original will of the Creator takes precedence over any subsequent concession made for the imperfections of human beings and he refers here to the allowances made by Moses in the law of divorce.

Jesus declares, equality between men and women when he recognises the equality of the sexes in the initiation of divorce, as well as in the establishment of marriage. A woman, like a man, can institute divorce proceedings against her spouse even as she also can leave her parents and cleave to a husband. But divorce for those who already belong in the way that he inaugurates, whether undertaken by one or the other, contradicts the fundamental direction of the way of divine union in the sacredness of marriage.

I don't think that this has ever come as a surprise to us. Jesus is the reconciler of all things – unification is his purpose. And for those of us who enter into marriage, I believe that union is all we think about - being together for the rest of our days - separation is not on our radar when we marry – generally speaking that is.

We also know that in our imperfection things happen that we do not foresee. And that when they do, and separation and divorce become a reality that ends the marriage, the God that we know in Jesus Christ is not a legalist above all else, but one who in a holistic way is compassionate, understanding, accepting and forgiving.

Being imperfect is a part of our reality – it is, as Mystic St Terese of Avila believes, the very reason for the Incarnation. God's response to us in our dilemma is to identify with us as precious in our imperfection and show us, through Christ, the way to perfection.

The Christian journey is all about awakening to our transformation into who we are in his likeness and there are always pitfalls on the journey of faith in terms of living, learning, dying and renewal. It is a journey, however, that is fluid rather than rigid - one that doesn't deny our imperfection and one that, at the same time, doesn't deny where we are headed, which is into communion with divine love, that is, to love God with our whole heart and our neighbour as ourselves.

And, as the gospel tells us today, how we do that is to continually receive God's rule like a child in innocence and openness without cynicism or negativity. We are not to let bad experiences turn us away from this, for the past does not immediately determine the future - as Job continued to believe throughout the Old Testament story today.

Childlike awareness and acceptance of God's love for us and our response in love for the sake of love and not for reward, nor fear of punishment, determines the kind of humanness that is like the divine and that is willed by God through Christ for all human beings.

Through him, in the power of the Spirit, may we continue to journey forward through the child in us who is open and receptive to living in communion with God, loving God with our whole heart, and our neighbour as our self.

The Lord be with you.