

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

(b-os30)

24 October 2021

Readings: Job 42: 1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34: 1-8; Hebrews 7: 20b-28; Mark 10: 46b-52.

"Seeing Too Much"

Job Looked into the Abyss

Over the past two months we have been served liberal helpings of the book of Job as the Old Testament reading both at Evening Prayer and at the Sunday Eucharist. It is a significant book in the Hebrew canon that grapples with the human condition using poetry and prose.

A popular view of the book is that it is about the question of 'Why do good people suffer?', but its message is a bit more complex than that. It is also concerned with several other things, such as:

- God's justice and the non-reward for good behaviour,
- a defence of the proposition of keeping faith in the face of doubt and meaninglessness, and
- an exploration of the place of pessimism in the religious life and one's capacity to overcome it.

The story begins by presenting the hero Job as a righteous and rich man who is faithful to God. It then segues to heaven and Satan (the accuser) who offered to test Job's faithfulness, and to which God agreed. Job was then struck by the loss of his status, wealth, family, and health.

The principal part of the book is a series of dialogues between Job and his friends and finally with God. Job complains about his unjust treatment and expresses a desire to die. Moreover, he is disillusioned with his friends, who prove to be unhelpful and self-interested.

Job entertained a happier life without God, who he saw as the cause of his affliction. He saw no connection between virtue and happiness and therefore railed against God. Meanwhile, his friends rebuked him for questioning God, and tried to take control of his life. Finally, God spoke to Job and challenged him to take a new perspective on himself and his understanding of God's activity in the world.

Job looked into the abyss of a world without justice, one without love, meaning or purpose, and saw that it is full of horror. Nevertheless, he remained faithful and survived. This brings us to today's reading in which Job looks to God, repents of his sin and anger toward God, and has his good fortunes restored.

The story does not exactly answer the question as to why a righteous person should suffer. Instead, it asks us to look at the question in another way, by pointing out that God does not reward people for being righteous nor punish those who are evil. What God did for Job, and by implication does for us, is provide the understanding, strength, and attitude to persevere through difficulty.

Job's experience caused him to see 'too much' of life. He became an 'outsider' by being stripped of all the external things that gave him meaning. Ultimately, he came through the torture and despair to survive by embracing the internal things that give meaning such as truth, integrity, courage, and faithfulness.

Prophets and Seers

In this respect, the story of Job is akin to the work of both Hebrew prophets and seers. Prophets are called to speak for God, usually by encouraging people to live lives of righteousness and for communities and leaders to deliver justice and peace. Seers, on the other hand, are visionaries who have spiritual and moral insight that help them to understand the present circumstances and consequently the predict future.

While the actual character of Job does not have these qualities, the book itself does. Through it we are encouraged to be faithful, not for reward but for integrity's own sake. In the book we are given a vision of a world where God is absent and its consequences. We are therefore called to be faithful, even if we cannot make sense of life, even if evil seems to triumph over good. Our test is to press on in faith.

People, and especially the powerful, do not always respond positively to prophets and seers. Their messages and visions are often rejected because they do not conform to popular sentiment. As it was with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, so it was with John the Baptist and Jesus, and on to our own times.

Those who 'see too much' are a problem because they can look into the soul of a community and its people. Having 'seen', they tend to 'identify' the corruption, hypocrisy, arrogance, and falsehood; responding by then 'proclaiming' a better way.

Seeing in the Darkness

Of course, it is not necessary to have physical sight to have vision. Vision is something created in the mind at the behest of the soul. In this respect the blind can 'see' what others often miss.

The Gospels recount Jesus confronting political and religious leaders, teaching his disciples, and performing signs (or miracles) to reveal the nature of God's Kingdom in the world. The scene for today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is Jericho, on the last leg of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. It is here that he is confronted by a blind man named Bartimaeus.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" he cried. Interestingly, Bartimaeus could see who Jesus was, even when those who were closest to him could not. Bartimaeus had spiritual insight and named Jesus as Messiah by giving him the title 'Son of David'.

Jesus responded by asking "What do you want?" the same question that was put to James and John in the previous narrative, when they asked for the seats of honour in God's Kingdom. The contrast is that Bartimaeus (a physical outsider) asked in humility. Bartimaeus understood the need for healing, whereas James and John (the insiders) were driven by need a for status.

Bartimaeus could see the truth because he had insight, while others around him were spiritually blind. He could see that Jesus was the Messiah, not through what he could physically touch or see, but through the eyes of faith. He saw 'too much'.

As the story recounts, upon receiving his physical sight he followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus did what the rich young man, whom we heard about two weeks ago, could not do. Bartimaeus left his past behind and followed Jesus.

It is through faith that we can see and understand the Kingdom of God, and by it we gain spiritual insight. This takes us back to Job, who learnt that despite all hardships and trials the only solution to the meaning of life is to seek God and be faithful.

There is a need to be vigilant in the business of seeing that is based on a desire to look past the obvious to what lies beyond – indeed, into the mystery of life. Spiritual seeing is part of the discipline of study, prayer, and meditation by which we ask God to open our eyes to see the presence of God in the world.

Jesus Saw Too Much

Seeing the Kingdom of God, however, brings its problems. For those who 'see too much' can find themselves in a state of restlessness that is only relieved by speaking out and acting on what is seen. Like Bartimaeus, we can find ourselves on a spiritual journey of following Jesus on the way to the cross.

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with an air of triumph, but also with a vision of what God's world should look like, which he called the Kingdom. He cleansed the temple of the traders with their sharp practices. He challenged the authorities about their hypocrisy and suggested that God had abandoned them because they had abandoned God. He called people to 'love one another' but he was executed as a traitor. In all of this he remained faithful to God. This was the way of Jesus, the outsider who 'saw too much'.

Jesus answered the dilemma raised by Job; meaninglessness, suffering and even death is overcome by seeing beyond present the needs to the eternal things of the Kingdom – such as love, justice, honesty, and resurrection.

The challenge for us is to change our perspective by seeking God's presence in our lives. It is a matter of taking the risk of 'seeing too much' on the one hand, but also of acting to transform the world on the other. This is the work of the prophet, the work of the seer, the work of one who follows Jesus 'on the way', the work of the church, our work.