

Sermon Preached at St Stephen's
11 October, 2015

Readings: Job 23: 1–9, 16 –17.
Mark 10: 17– 31

- When Katherine told her father Jim wanted to marry her, her father asked, "Is Jim religious?" "Oh yes," replied Katherine. "In fact, he thinks he's God Almighty."
- Said the psychiatrist to the patient, "I'm not aware of your problem, so perhaps you should start at the beginning."

Said the patient to the psychiatrist, "All right. In the beginning I created the heavens and the earth..."

Jim's problem and the patient's problem are like the flip side of Job's problem, and I think the rest of us are somewhere in between. Let's explore that.

For many people life is cruisy, or at least that's what they would like us to believe. There are no real problems, at least none that a bit more money wouldn't solve, a bit more time mightn't fix, or a few more friends you could trust mightn't help with, but that's life and you've just got to get on, don't you. One problem with that approach is that it misses out on another important part of our lives, a connection with God, with the spiritual side of our existence.

An article on Maori spirituality "Beyond Belief" focusses on an important issue, though not one that the writer admits to being valid, and that is the complete lack of public acknowledgement of the place of spiritual awareness in Pakeha society. With that lack is also a loss of the idea of God, let alone any sense of belief or trust in God. Instead, I believe part of our society's problem is the misguided notion that we are gods or can be as gods. We have come to believe the serpent's lie in Genesis "You will be as God."

Now I said Jim and the patient's problem were flip sides of Job's problem. Job, a once rich and healthy family man, was plagued by one real problem in all the troubles that beset him, and that was the absence of God. All he needed he said was the chance to put his case before God and he knew that God would judge him rightly. However, as his trials went on, and as his friends condemned him by their judgmental attitudes and wrong reasoning, he became less and less sure of the presence of God. *"If I go to the east, he is not there; or to the west, I still cannot find him."*

Job is calling for an explanation from a God who seems to be avoiding him yet his language is still the language of belief. His faith is characterised by a strong sense of the lordship of God. Yet in the midst of unremitting poverty and suffering these difficult questions have arisen and Job seeks an answer which goes beyond the simple affirmation of "God gave them to me, God has taken them away from me." Simply accepting the circumstances can be rather a resignation to evil and injustice that becomes an obstacle to faith in God. One of Job's problems then is how to speak to an absent God.

The primary cause of Job's distress at this point is not so much his suffering in itself, but rather the incomprehensibility of that suffering, the lack of an understandable story or framework in which his pain might be placed, and therefore begin to make sense. Job had a deeply held belief and expectation that God should provide such a framework, that God ought to guarantee and assure the meaningfulness of Job's apparently 'innocent' suffering. The suffering of Job, his loss and his shame, are terrible enough, but what distresses him even more is the fact that the God he desires, the God who gives meaning to suffering, refuses to present himself. *"If I go forward, he is not there; or back-*

ward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”

Isn't this all too familiar? Many of you will have faced these questions yourselves. Some of you are perhaps asking them right now. If God is a God of love, why does God leave us on our own at times of pain and suffering? If God is a God of justice, why do the apparently innocent suffer, even the most vulnerable, who are unable to protect themselves? Any way we might look at them, such questions are really desperate enquiries about the ultimate meaning of our lives; and we ask them of God, because we expect and believe that God is one who is able to support the meaning we work with. But God does not guarantee the meaningfulness of our lives.

Jim's problem is what to do in place of an absent God, not realising that there is a God to be absent. His solution is to create his own God. We are bombarded by images of this all around us. You are the one calling the shots. Have it your way. The lifestyle of your creation. What you want you can have—anytime, anywhere, anyplace (Just name your interest rate and we'll do the rest!) A commercial for one of those SUV's used the byline: “You are Invincible. You are All-Powerful. You are Unstoppable. You are on Your Way to the Grocery Store.” Many commercials pay homage to this god-making process, and even we in the church are not immune to its seductive idea.

Is it any wonder then that our young people have no sense of self beyond themselves? Aren't we led to believe that as gods we can fix all our own messes? The consequence of that is, that if we can't, then we are somehow less than human, that we are failures. In church we respond to this by forgetting to look at the darker side of our lives. We become prone not to worship someone other than ourselves. Rather we go to worship mostly to feel good about ourselves, and possibly feel good about helping someone less fortunate than ourselves.

In the midst of all this stands the broken, hurting, isolated person who understands only too clearly that they are not God. In a society that is busy, there is no time to spend with such people. In a society that is supposed to be healthy, there is no room for the unhealthy. In a society where everyone is friends there is no place for someone who has fallen out of relationship. Yet, everywhere around them the cry is to be God.

Curiously, one of the accusations about Job was that he did not give to the poor, or look after the oppressed. The idea is that one cannot seek God truly without responding to the poor. Anything else is false religion. Job responds to that later on, but we cannot help but sense something of that same issue with the young man who came to Jesus seeking the way to gain eternal life, to seek permanent and lasting meaning for his life. Jesus first of all draws the man's attention to the first half of the Ten Commandments before citing the second half in his reply.

Jesus' direct answer to the man's question is a loose list of the key commands in the ten commandments, with one about not defrauding, not originally in the ten, thrown in. It was a good answer – at least, from the perspective of the man, because it enabled him to affirm that he had kept them all from his youth. That was an admirable effort and Jesus looked on him lovingly.

The story might have ended there except for Jesus' next response which spoils the nice scene. Obviously Jesus didn't understand love as giving permission to avoid issues. Out of love he challenges the man. One thing is missing. This hardly refers to a commandment that Jesus has left out - like 'Do not covet', because it is Jesus who would have missed it out, not the man! How then are these words to be understood?

Is Jesus saying that to gain eternal life the man must now do three things: keep the commandments, sell his goods, giving the proceeds to the poor, and lastly follow Jesus? If that were so, then Jesus is being rather unfair telling him that the way was to keep the commandments. He *was* doing that! It would still imply something is missing from Jesus' answer. Jesus' challenge to the man to sell

possessions, give to the poor and follow him, was a way of exposing a flaw in the man's keeping of the commandments. As admirable his effort had been, he had missed the point of the commandments. Jesus' challenge exposed what was missing: a sense of compassion for the poor. The man needed to understand the commandments the way they are truly to be understood, the way Jesus interpreted them, not as a series of commands to be obeyed or boxes to be ticked. Then he needed to follow Jesus, not as an alternative to the commandments, but as the way of understanding them. Sadly, it is possible to go through life never doing anything wrong - and never doing anything good or generous. Following Jesus means engaging life in a way that makes a difference.

Our godless culture, our god-creating culture prizes self fulfilment over self sacrifice and that makes it even harder to respond with meaning to the suffering around us, and within us. It doesn't want to deal with the darker side of society. A 900 page study on Poverty in Britain made no reference to the fact that at the same time people were getting poorer, a few people were getting very much richer. The blame focussed on those in the predicament of poverty. The writer was like Job's accusers, and that view is very much in the public mind through the way the media presents it to us. Whatever our situation though, Job's story offers us all hope that we can draw from. Job maintains his innocence aware that there is not necessarily a cause and effect between his sorry state and actions he may or may not have done. Moreover, he continues to place his trust in a God who seems to be absent, he continues to dialogue with God, to reason with God, even when he is absolutely terrified by the prospect.

Job knows that there he will find his defender, God. God who will not allow him to be destroyed in the world of injustice and loneliness, God, the living God whose graceful mercy and love is the only context to understand justice. This hope causes Job's heart to hope, and allows him to be happy in the midst of his trials.

This hope is there for each of us today, so that we too can see our liberator, our friend, but the price is being honest with ourselves and to recognise our need to struggle with God, with our society and so renew our souls.