

Sunday 28 July 2024, Trinity 9 Matins

Job 19.1-27a

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If you were here last week, you may recall hearing an excellent sermon from Fr Tim on the book of Job. Job grapples with some of our most basic questions about God's relationship to his creation and our understanding of His inscrutable ways. 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' The problem of suffering, the apparent injustice of pain, and the desire to apportion blame are all central themes throughout the book of Job.

For such a significant book, it's rather a shame it isn't in the right place in our Bibles. You see, Job is the oldest book in the Bible and, were one to read the scriptures in chronological order, we would encounter Job before Genesis and the rest of the five books of Moses. Job, the man hard done by- before the creation of the world. The early church showed both wisdom and prejudice when it chose to begin the story 'in the beginning'. A natural narrative impulse and a desire to foster a sense of telos, or ultimate direction, decided Genesis' pride of place and relegated Job to the wisdom books, gathered together after the histories. The wisdom in this decision is that the Bible does retain a sense of being a single story, with a clear beginning and a clear end. The prejudice is that such a narrative structure defines how we have read the Bible ever since, and not always for the better. But what if things had been different? What if Job, rather than Genesis, was the beginning of the story? Allow me to offer a few thoughts:

As it stands, our Bible begins with God making things: stuff, matter. We start with God as creator. Job is a book about relationship and, significantly, a book depicting the relationship of the sovereign to the powerless. You may say that Job doesn't always depict God in the best light. After all, it is God who allows the accuser, the Satan, to wreck Job's life. But it is also God who knows Job's inmost thoughts; God knows Job's character. At no point does Job accuse God of being unjust, nor does he curse God as his friends and his wife tell him he should. What the book of Job might have taught us, if placed at the beginning of our faith story, is that God knows, and will ultimately honour, those who are His faithful ones who trust in His goodness and His justice no matter what happens and no matter what anyone else says.

Genesis is a book of history written through a mythological lens. But Job is a book which clearly stands outside of history. It is a morality tale which touches on some of the deepest questions humanity can ever ask and some of the most painful experiences we can ever undergo. If the Church had begun with Job, it might not have gone down the rabbit-trail of trying to force the reality of the universe into the mythical construct of creation in Genesis. Seven twenty-four hour periods, the seven days of creation, would, after Job, have appeared obviously symbolic. Male and female, created for each other, would have been seen as obviously reflective of a societal understanding of humanity rather than a divinely-ordained pattern. Even sin would have been reconsidered, not as resulting from the eating of an apple- another mythical act with deep symbolic resonance- but as resulting from our struggle to come to terms with our

experience of unfairness, lack, and loss in a profoundly painful world. In other words, putting Job at the beginning of the Bible would have saved us so many problems!

But perhaps even more significant than these, is that Job is a book of resurrection and restoration. In our first lesson this morning we heard the words made famous by George Frideric Handel,

'I know that my redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:
and though after my skin worms destroy this body,
yet in my flesh shall I see God:
whom I shall see for myself,
and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.'

Had the Church seen fit to begin the Bible with Job, it is the resurrection, not the incarnation, that would have taken pride of place in the Christian story. From the very beginning, the risen Christ, the redeemer that liveth, would have stood as the key figure of Christian faith. Not a babe in a manger, but a victorious saviour, His work completed. Genesis foretells the birth; Job foretells the resurrection. And Job's foretelling is four hundred years older than that of Genesis. What a different Church we would be if it was Easter rather than Christmas that defined our self-conception. What a different faith we would proclaim if it were better grounded in the resurrection of Christ always having been the point of the tale. What different people we would be if, rather than in the child, we saw our salvation in the victorious man.

None of what has been can be undone. The universal Church isn't going to reorder its Biblical books to be in order of writing. But I commend to you the faith-experiment of reading the Bible in this way. I commend to you the pious practice of examining the roots of our faith and asking why it is we believe what we do in the particular way that we do. I urge you to think about what it might mean if you were to shift your own inner landscape of faith so that it found its centre in resurrection and restoration. I suspect many of us are Christmas Christians. Not that we only believe or attend services at Christmas, but that our faith is found most powerfully at the manger. The manger is good, a place of precious devotion. But it is only the beginning of the redemptive work of Jesus. Perhaps contemplate what it would be to be an Easter Christian, your faith found most powerfully at the empty tomb. Does it make a difference to start at the end of the story? Because that's what Job does. 'In the beginning... I know that my redeemer liveth.' Amen.