

Comment: *Neglecting the Book of Job*

It's a curious feature of the Lectionary that Sunday-Mass-going Catholics have little occasion ever to hear anything from the Book of Job. For generations of readers over the centuries, as well as modern literary critics and even some philosophers of religion, it counts as one of the incontestably great works of literature, comparable with ancient Greek tragedies or *King Lear* or whatever other exploration of our mortal condition at its most incomprehensible might seem relevant.

Daily Mass-goers get quite substantial extracts in week 26 of Ordinary Time, every other year. In the 3-year Sunday cycle, however, we have snippets twice: on the 5th and 12th Sundays of Year B: February 8th and June 21st as it happens, this year. Nothing in the other two years. It seems a strange neglect of such a classic text.

The Old Testament reading at Sunday Mass is intended to focus our thoughts about the gospel of the day, or anyway the homilist's. On the 5th Sunday in Year B, then, the focus has to be on the wretchedness of human life: Mark's little cameo of Jesus early in his ministry, preaching in synagogues but mainly responding to large crowds of ailing and demon-possessed people (Mark 1: 29–39), including Simon Peter's mother-in-law, while trying to keep secret his own identity as God's agent.

The half dozen verses selected to focus our thoughts come from Job's first outburst of despairing rage against God for the misery of human life (Job 7: 1–4, 6–7): nothing about sickness and demon possession actually, all on human existence as like slave labour; worse still, like months of emptiness, nights of misery, tossing and turning until dawn; concluding with the verse: 'My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope'.

Bleak as these six verses are, they omit one — 'My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken and become loathsome' — presumably felt by the experts in Rome who created the present lectionary as unpalatably harsh for the average Sunday morning Mass-goer.

The problem in the Book of Job, anyway, is the problem of why innocent people are so often afflicted with terrible suffering: the problem of the meaning of suffering, indeed the problem of whether anything means anything at all, ultimately. Job is the man stripped of everything, whose children die, whose wife tells him to curse God and die; and then whose friends, his 'comforters', explain why these

terrible things have happened to him, insisting it must be his own fault, suffering on this scale can only be punishment for one's having done wrong — a very ancient and still very prevalent belief, which the counseling offered to people traumatically distressed is mainly directed at exposing and eliminating.

The greatness of the Book of Job lies in its absolutely denying any necessary connection between what we suffer and what we deserve. Job's philosopher friends want him to admit he deserved his affliction, he knows he didn't and simply refuses to do so. Rather, he demands an explanation directly from God and what he gets (in some magnificent poetry) is God's demand that he just has to think differently. Job has a legal model of justice, of faults and rights, of what people deserve; as if innocent suffering must imply injustice on the part of God, and so on. That picture of God is replaced in the culminating rhetoric with God's self-portrait as sheer savage power of life, fierce delight in every creature, lions waiting to kill their prey, young ravens crying for food, mountain goats with no one to help them give birth; the wild ass, the wild ox, the ostrich, comically ungainly creatures, like the crocodile and hippopotamus, and so on. Any and every attempt to hold God to account by human moral standards falls away. There's no need to be so anthropocentric. After all, what if human beings suffer like every other creature?

The Book of Job is conventionally dated to about 400 BC (Sophocles died in 404 BC). We have no idea who composed it or how and why it found its way into the Bible. Maybe for the Lectionary selectors the point about Jesus as Mark portrays him is that in Jesus we see God healing frail and vulnerable mortal human beings: in spite of everything we have a God who is on our side, in the Incarnation. Yet, when his wife told him to curse God and die, Job reproached her: 'Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and not receive evil?' (Job 2:10). As he had already said (Job 1:21): 'Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither; the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD' — memorably unsettling words. Perhaps the neglect of the Book of Job in our Sunday worship is meant to spare us from such deep and dark thoughts.

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