

PENTECOST 20B, 03-10-2021 The Reverend Lorna Green

Job 1.1; 2.1-10; Ps 26; Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.' People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Hands up if you know which movie begins with this: A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

Yes- it's Star Wars, the very first movie in the franchise.

By setting this story in a distant, unknown time and place, it becomes timeless: a story of epic battles before the forces of good triumph over evil.

Similarly, the book of Job is set in a far-off land, who knows when. Nobody even knows when it was written; scholars guess any time between ten and two centuries before the time of Jesus. It is doubtful that it describes the life of a real person; rather it uses the story of Job to explore the problem of suffering, and where God fits into the picture.

The lectionary leaves out big chunks of the story, so I encourage you to read of it at home- at least the first couple of chapters.

If you are not familiar with the story, it begins with a character called Job who is almost too good to be true. He's righteous, generous, prosperous, and successful- until suddenly he isn't, and his suffering is immense.

His so-called friends argue that he must have done something bad to be punished so much, but Job insists that he is innocent; and so this book asks us to consider why good people suffer.

If you read Deuteronomy or Proverbs, much of the teaching is about being a good, wise person and obeying the Law, because 'good' people are blessed with health, wealth and happiness, whereas 'bad' people, who don't obey the Law, end up sick or starving. The Book of Job subverts this teaching, which was prevalent in the Judaism of the past.

The issue of undeserved suffering is still a difficult one for us today, and people still want to know why God 'allows' terrible things to happen. Sometimes it can be given as a reason a person refuses to believe in God: if God exists then why do children die of cancer, why does coronavirus exist, or volcanoes destroy towns and cities, and so on.

There are those who say if God exists, God must be horrible and cruel, because surely if God is all-powerful then disasters and disease wouldn't happen.

Part of the answer may be that we humans cause a lot of our own suffering by our actions that affect our health or our unjust economies or taking risks or whatever. And while that's true it can't explain why babies can suffer, or why some people get cancer and others don't. We are left with a great many questions.

The writer of Psalm 26 sounds like another person who is too good to be true: he wears his integrity like a badge of honour, as if he's saying, 'Look at me! How good am I?' But he still asks God to look after him, to redeem him and be gracious to him, as if he knows he can't do it all on his own. He needs God.

The Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as the reflection of God's glory, honoured and majestic. It also reminds us that Jesus put us right with God through his suffering and death, so that we would not have to die estranged from God.

Here is the paradox, that in Jesus is embodied glory and humiliation, power and suffering, authority and servanthood.

For the Jews, 'Christ crucified' was a scandal, because the mysterious God whose name could not be spoken could never be visible to human eyes- let alone be capable of pain and suffering. And for the Greeks or Gentiles, any god who weeps or suffers and dies could not possibly be a god.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is asked about divorce, which was legal at that time- for Jewish men, anyway. Jesus told the questioners that although divorce was legal, it was not what God intended for people.

God's intention was and continues to be that human relationships would echo the relationship between God and the church, or between the three Persons of the Trinity: loving, nurturing, sustaining, and all the good things God wants for us.

Humans being what we are, relationships do break down and divorce can be necessary so that people can heal and move on- and Jesus acknowledged that. He also subverted the patriarchal view of marriage which held that wives were the property of husbands and could be disposed of like property, remembering there was no provision for the care of divorced women and their children in ancient society.

When Jesus went on to tell his disciples not to send the children away, he made the point of telling them that it would be good if all of us could receive the kingdom of God like little children, reinforcing his teaching that God reaches out to those with the least power, those who are most vulnerable- like the divorced women and little children of his day.

There is a thread running through these Bible texts, which is that faith is not straightforward or black and white. It is ambiguous and complex, mysterious, and paradoxical.

We follow a God who, we believe, is all-powerful, who created everything that is; yet who loved us tiny humans enough to come to us as a helpless baby.

We believe in Jesus, who had the power to heal the sick and feed the hungry; yet who allowed himself to be executed to show the world what love looks like.

There are no easy answers. Those who say they believe that every word in the Bible is literally true and historically accurate either haven't read it properly or are kidding themselves, because the Bible contains ambiguities and even outright contradictions. Inspired by God it may be, but it was written by humans who brought their own contexts and cultures with them.

The Bible is meant to challenge us. If we read it seriously it will not allow us to confuse our superstitions or folk-religion with it. Can we live with paradox, mystery, and ambiguity? Can we accept that we can't explain or understand everything? Can we believe that God owes us nothing- yet loves us more than we can imagine?

The Lord be with you.