



Our Lady of Perpetual Help

Catholic Church - Richmond - Wakefield - Waimea West - New Zealand

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

5 February 2012

Homily



I guess we have all heard of the proverbial sayings: 'don't cry over spilt milk'; 'look on the bright side'; 'every cloud has a silver lining'; 'get over it.' These very positive directives try to correct our very human tendency to dwell on the negative: past hurts, failures, tragedies, inadequacies and the like. For who among us hasn't succumbed to self-pity at times; who hasn't felt inadequate, demoralised or a bit of a failure? We are in good company then with the central character of our first reading this Sunday.

Job (along with St Joseph) was what the bible calls 'a just man.' The writer, perhaps around 700 years before Jesus, uses the historical figure of this good man and creates a story around it. The story deals with the profound theological problem of the meaning of suffering in the life of a just person. Why does God seem to allow good people to suffer?

Though the book of Job was written all those years ago, the question is an enduring one. I would be surprised if any of us haven't asked ourselves at one time or another: why does God let good people suffer? – especially me! Mother Theresa of Calcutta put this weighty question a slightly different way, saying: *'I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that He didn't trust me so much!'* The author of our reading has Job experiencing a whole series of disasters and tragedies sent by God to test his faith. The question is: will Job still be God's obedient and trusting servant or will he lose faith in God's providence, will he even curse God? Our reading is part of Job's lament, his complaint to God. He compares human life in general to forced military service, to the work of a day labourer, and to simple slavery – three miserable states of life common at the time. Job, who before his tragedies enjoyed an untroubled relationship with his bountiful God, appeals implicitly to the love God has for him. His human friends may have deserted him in his troubles, but he takes for granted that God, his divine friend, will come looking for him – only it may then be too late!

The book of Job comes to no resolution of this deep theological problem of why God allows good people to suffer. I guess we would say today that it is part of the mystery of God, an aspect of the gift of free will that we have been given. Perhaps the closest analogy we can find

would be parents who, out of love and with their child's best interests at heart, let their children explore and eventually make their own way in the world, even though they know they will make mistakes and might be hurt or even injured. Good parents though are always there to comfort and to pick up the pieces!

Jesus in our gospel also deals with human suffering, not in a philosophical manner as does the author of Job, but in a down-to-earth, practical way. Jesus, very much like Job, has a sense of the very nature of God as merciful love. God leaves us free, so of course bad decisions can and are made, and sickness and tragedy happen. But God, our divine friend, is always with us, and constantly seeks to heal and comfort us.

Jesus demonstrates the *reality* of this divine healing and comfort. He heals Simon Peter's mother in law of fever and countless others of sickness and disease. This healing is a sign of God's Kingdom that is the mission of Jesus to preach.

Scripture scholars speculate that St Mark, in writing his gospel in the way he did, wanted to down-play a just a little the wondrous healings and miracles that Jesus performed. This is why he records Jesus spending time alone in prayer and then moving on to the neighbouring country towns where he will not so much work miracles, but *preach*, announcing the coming of God's Kingdom. For as Jesus says, '*that is why I came.*' St Mark was concerned that some in his community might become fixated on the miraculous and neglect the wider context of the preaching of God's Kingdom of which the miracles were but signs.

I happened to be watching a programme the other night about the famous Route 66 in the USA. A church was shown which had a sign out front: *Expect and accept miracles.* We Catholics would say – yes, certainly – but don't forget God and God's love and mercy that lie behind and are the reason for the miracles!

Perhaps this week we might, like Jesus, make a particular effort to find a space alone to reflect and pray. We could reflect not so much on our faults and failings and failures, but rather on all the blessings we have enjoyed in our lives and still enjoy. We might then ask the Lord to fill us anew with the assurance of God's abiding presence with us, and of God's love and mercy. We too then will surely be blessed anew with the wonderful vision of God's Kingdom breaking in on our lives and our world.