

Mark 1:29-39, 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 7th, 2021

Our first reading today is taken from the Book of Job; in it we hear Job speaking about his suffering and his thoughts on the meaning of life. He says, *“¹ Is not life on earth a drudgery, its days like those of a hireling? ² Like a slave who longs for the shade, a hireling who waits for wages, ³ So I have been assigned months of futility, and troubled nights have been counted off for me... ⁶ My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle; they come to an end without hope. ⁷ Remember that my life is like the wind; my eye will not see happiness again.”* (Job 7)

It is not a very uplifting message, but it is an extremely important one for all of us to contemplate and seek to understand, especially during these times we are living in today. I believe that the Church, through Job, has an important message for us today. Dr. Peter Kreeft, in his book, “The Three Philosophies of Life”, which I found to be extremely helpful in shedding light on this amazing but somewhat challenging text, had this to say about the Book of Job, *“It is universally recognized that Job is one of the greatest books ever written: a masterpiece, an all time classic. To the sensitive reader, it is real magic. It is terrifying and beautiful, beautifully terrifying and terrifyingly beautiful. It is fascinating, haunting, teasingly mysterious, tender, and yet powerful as a sledgehammer. It can be as obsessive as few books can.”*

What makes the Book of Job so important is the question that it asks, “How could God – the all good and all powerful God – let bad things happen to good people.” This is the question that I believe presents the best argument against the existence of God. You will likely hear modern atheists re-phrase this question into something a little more emotionally provocative like, “How could an all loving God allow a child to suffer with cancer?” It is important to keep in mind this is not some new argument that the Church has never heard before or has never considered its implications. St. Thomas Aquinas states the question more precisely in his famous

Summa Theologica, saying, *“If one of two contraries is infinite, the other is wholly eliminated. But God is infinite goodness. Thus, if God exists, evil will be wholly eliminated. But there is evil. Therefore, God does not exist.”* (S Th I, 2, 3, Obj.1) St. Thomas often states his opponent’s arguments much better than they do. St. Thomas wrote in the Thirteenth Century and scholars really don’t know when the Book of Job was written. They propose dates that vary from between 1800 B.C. and 400 B.C. The point is that people of faith have been struggling with the question of evil and suffering for a long time, and they have been struggling with it because it is an important and difficult and deeply profound question that goes to the core of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a human being.

We only hear from the Book of Job twice in our Sunday readings through the Church’s 3-year cycle, and since it is such an important question, and such an important book, I would like to try to briefly go through the story to give you a sense of what is inside. The story is set in the time of the patriarchs of Israel, and Job is described as a “sound and honest man who feared God and shunned evil.” (Job 1 ff.) He had seven sons and three daughters. He is described as one of the most prosperous of all the Sons of the East having many servants and owning many animals. The story then shifts to heaven where God is holding court with the “Sons of God”, the heavenly angels, and among them appears Satan. God asks Satan where he has been and he replies, *“Prowling about on the earth, roaming here to there.”* God asks him if he has seen his servant Job, who is like no other on earth, a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil. Satan answers, *“Yes, but Job is not God fearing for nothing is he? You have put a wall around him and blessed him with many riches, if you take those things away from him, then he will curse you to your face.”* And God says, *“Do as you will, but do no harm to his person.”* In the course of the next day Job loses everything, all his animals are stolen or destroyed, his servants are killed, and his children die when the house they are all in collapses on them. Job is devastated and falls to

the ground and prays his famous prayer: *“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked shall I return again; the Lord gave and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”* The Scripture continues, *“In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”*

The scene then shifts back to the heavenly court and once again Satan appears before God, and God tells him, *“Job is still upright and blameless, still fears God and turns away from evil; he persists in his integrity still; you achieved nothing by provoking me to ruin him.”* And Satan replies, *“Skin for skin, someone will give away all he has to save his life. But stretch out your hand and lay a finger on his bone and flesh; I warrant you; he will curse you to your face.”* Once again God relents and says, *“He is in your power, but only spare his life.”* Satan then afflicts Job with “loathsome sores” from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. We are told Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself and sat among the ashes. That is where we find Job in today’s first reading, so we can understand why the words he speaks are so dark.

As Job sits in the ashes having lost everything, all his worldly possessions, his children, and his health; he is visited by three friends who have heard of his plight and have come to console him. Unfortunately for Job, his friends’ idea of consolation is to tell him that the reason he is suffering so horribly is because he must have sinned horribly. All he needs to do is to admit his sin, repent of what he has done wrong, and he will once again find himself in God’s good graces. This is the idea that bad things happen to us because we sin. Of course, there is some truth to this. Indeed, if we do something bad there are consequences to those bad actions. If we commit a crime we will likely be arrested, and often it is this bad consequence that will cause us to change our ways and get us back on the right track. The problem in our story is that Job is a very stubborn man, and he maintains that it is not true that he has sinned, and that he has not done anything wrong to merit this punishment. This is a key point in our story, Job is innocent, and he is suffering terribly. We know he is innocent because we were told at the

beginning of the story, by God, that he is innocent and that he is a sound, upright man, who feared God and shunned evil; our question remains, “Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?” The debate between Job and his friends goes on for much of the book until Job makes a grand plea of his innocence of even the slightest sin, and dramatically calls on God to come down and hear his case and to charge him with what he is accusing him of, and that he will give God an account of his every step and go as boldly as a prince to meet Him! (Job 31)

Well, God does answer Job. Not in quite the way Job or we would like. God appears in a whirlwind and says, *“Who is this who darkens counsel with words of ignorance? ³ Gird up your loins now, like a man; I will question you, and you tell me the answers! ⁴ Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its size? Surely you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? ⁶ Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid its cornerstone, ⁷ While the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”* And this goes on for quite a while where God makes it very clear that He is God and Job is not. Job acknowledges this and says, *“Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...Before, I knew you only by hearsay, but now having seen you with my own eyes, I retract what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.”* (Job 42)

Job received his answer. Now if you are like me that answer wasn't very satisfactory, but as Dr. Kreeft points out, the key to the Book of Job lies in the fact that once Job sees God with his own eyes, he no longer needs to question Him, Job has his answer. What do we see in today's Gospel? We see Jesus stepping into His role as the Messiah of Israel. He is not the leader that will call them to violent rebellion; He is the leader who draws close to them in their suffering. He heals Peter's mother-in-law with the touch of his hand, and the entire city shows up at his door at sun-down to be healed physically from illness and spiritually from demonic

possession. We see Jesus experiencing and alleviating the suffering of His people. This is His mission. This is what He has come to do and every step He takes, every miracle he works, brings him one step closer to the Cross, where he will not only enter into the suffering of His people, but will take that suffering upon Himself, as our gospel acclamation for today says, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” Like Job’s claim of innocence, Jesus is truly innocent of any sin. He doesn’t deserve to suffer, but he does anyway. Somehow the answer we are seeking to the question “Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?” is bound up in the fact that we call the Friday, the day when Jesus, the holy and innocent Son of God, was scourged nearly to death, repeatedly beaten, mocked, spit upon, stripped naked, utterly humiliated to the point of God-forsakenness, and finally murdered on the Cross; that is the day we call “Good Friday”. Somehow, through a love that surpasses all understanding, God is able to take the worst evil ever to happen, the murder of His holy and innocent Son, and transform that evil, through the power of that love, into the salvation of the world. Through the Cross, Jesus took on our life of suffering so that we never again have to suffer alone. He draws close to us; to share in our loneliness, our isolation, our loss, our grief, our mourning, so that through Him, we can begin to share in His life of grace as we look forward in hope and faith to everlasting life with Him, in that place where *“he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”* (Rev 21) That is our answer. That is our faith.