

## 3rd before Advent – eternal life

### All Saints, Coddington, 7th November 2010

The book of Job is one of the more interesting books in the Old Testament. Well, perhaps I ought to qualify that a little bit as it is very long and gets a bit tedious at times, but its message is very interesting. It is set in very ancient times when Job, a just man, was tested by God with a set of afflictions eventually leaving him with no money, property, or family and a disfiguring illness. At this point his friends, the proverbial Job's comforters, try and tell him that he must have sinned and that if he would but repent he would be restored. Job will have none of this but eventually God answers Job out of the whirlwind, Job does repent and is eventually restored to live happily ever after.

Superficially this makes no sense at all, but one of the most helpful things I have read about this book is that probably the story of Job's testing was a very old one which somebody has split in two and inserted the whole poem about Job's comforters which is an extended argument on why the good suffer. In effect, the original story of Job's testing and restoration is too simple: the poem is there to say it is not like that.

The climax of the poem is formed by those very familiar words, "I know that my Redeemer liveth", which we interpret in a messianic way, but which would have been understood quite differently by the original readers. Here's a modern translation:

But in my heart I know that my vindicator lives  
and that he will rise last to speak in court  
and I shall discern my witness standing at my side  
and see my defending counsel, even God himself,  
whom I shall see with my own eyes, I myself and no other.

Job is sure that he has done no wrong, but equally has faith in God who will defend him. But at the end of the book, when God answers Job out of the whirlwind, He simply overwhelms him with questions.

Where were you when I laid the Earth's foundation?  
Who laid its cornerstone in place when the morning stars sang together  
and all the sons of God shouted aloud?

And so on through dozens of beautiful stanzas.

In a way this starts to answer the question of why the good suffer. Job is actually not perfect – he keeps slaves, for example, but that is not why he suffers. We suffer because we are part of God's creation and that creation has a purpose which is beyond our ability to grasp. But carrying out that purpose will involve some suffering – that surely is one of the messages of the Cross. It's a bit like a bee which in defending the hive may lose its life. It doesn't know that, but knows that attacking intruders is what its purpose in life is. We know much more about our situation in life and are much more aware of the consequences of our actions but we still cannot understand fully how what we do will fulfil God's purpose. We can only act in faith and follow Jesus, but doing that may well involve some hardship and suffering.

So, we may wonder, is it worth it? Should we avoid all suffering? Let's think about some situation in life where we do take risks. Like soldiers for example. We send them to Afghanistan and many come back in a coffin. Why do they take such risks? And the answer is that they think that the goal, namely the defence of the country, is worth it, even though we might not know to what extent their actions do that. But of course that risk does call for some response from us to ensure that the actions we ask them to take do indeed defend the realm and that our soldiers are well supported both in the field and back home.

Here is another, trivial, example. Every time you take a car journey you are risking your life, but you think that achieving your destination is worth the risk. You have a goal, the journey helps you achieve that goal and the goal is worth the risk.

More relevant is the risk taken by aid workers in many parts of the world. I guess the Christian workers would say they are trying to bring about the kingdom of God, or at any rate simply following Christ. I suppose the non-Christian aid workers would simply say they are working for a better world but I think these two goals are not too dissimilar. But action may involve suffering and as Christians we are called to action because we follow a goal.

The actions that aid workers take are adventurous, but risky. They need to be supported by our actions which are not particularly risky but can be pretty boring, or costly in some other way. I am thinking of fundraising and giving, both of which work towards bringing about the kingdom of God, our goal. And there are lots and lots of other things, all of which work towards the kingdom and we need to be active in them, according to our abilities. But I think we need to be outward looking in working towards this goal. Looking after this church, for example, is a necessary part of this, but it is not enough. We must actively do something to bring about the kingdom of God and that activity may be costly.

So we need motivation, a goal, something to aim for, something to say why we are here. Traditionally, this has been supplied by our idea of heaven and this is what our second reading is talking about. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (this is why they were sad, do you see? ... Sorry!) Anyway, they asked Jesus this trick question to point out the inconsistencies in their idea of heaven, which is not difficult to do for any idea of heaven, including the book of Revelation. The basic problem is that we are talking about something which is incomprehensible, to me quite as much as to you, so how am I going to talk about it? It's far worse than trying to explain what the large hadron collider is doing in its search for the Higgs boson, a task I would not dream of undertaking!

But here goes, anyway. The Sadducees had an idea of heaven as being just like this life, only longer. If you think about it this does not sound like a terribly good idea – it's certainly not something that sounds terribly attractive to me. But the Sadducees were simply caught in their box of rules and wanted to catch Jesus out, rather than try and understand something about heaven. Jesus' answer was aimed at trying to get them to think outside that box. They could take the idea of Angels because that was in their books, so Jesus batted the ball back into their court and in effect told them to think again.

But Jesus' answer has some problems for us. The Angels sound a bit too unemotional and inhuman. Does no one fall in love in heaven? Does no one become hungry? Does anyone change? The answer to these questions must be no, and this must be a real challenge to our ideas of heaven, because we are so tied into our earthly bodies we can have no conception of any other existence.

So where does that leave our goal in life, the goal for which we may have to suffer? Personally, rather than imagining various improbable scenarios, I hold fast to these beliefs: that there are such things as good and evil and it matters eternally whether we do them or not. And if that gets too abstract for real life, I invoke the image of Jesus, who said, "I am the way, the truth and I am life." And who also said, "Follow me."