

## ***Readings***

**Job 1:1, 2:1-10**

**Mark 10: 2-16**

## ***Sermon***

When I first sat down and looked at the readings for today, I remembered that every time I have preached on this particular gospel text, I have upset someone. Helpfully Bill Loader, in his online commentary adds an important contribution to relieve the stress this passage often causes divorced people by saying that there is always a problem when people take Jesus' sayings as legal pronouncements. Forgiveness is always possible.

Nevertheless, I was sufficiently discouraged by remembering previous failures so, I went and mowed the lawn instead.

I was just about to start the mower to begin to mow the street berm when I was ambushed by two masked evangelists. They had a one sheet survey they wanted me to fill in. I naively thought that might be the best way to finish the conversation and get on with the task in hand.

However halfway down the page I realised the questions were cunningly structured so that I would agree that covid19 was predicted in the Bible and is a symbol of the end times. At that point I politely explained that I had answered all I was prepared to. That sent them, into a flurry of fundamentalism which started to be annoying. My slightly annoyed response was to tell them that it was most insensitive to be going door to door when we were in level two lockdown. Of course, they pointed to their masks, but I said that was not sufficient and they would still be upsetting people. They had in fact triggered a little peeve in my mind about not being permitted to go door to door, or even put flyers in letter boxes, to support my friend in the Council bi election

To rephrase Matthew 8:9 I might have people under me in that quest, but I am also a man under authority. So, I put the earmuffs on and started the mower. In all honesty I should note that in a democracy authority can be argued with In all honesty I should note that in a democracy authority can be argued with and so we got permission deliver the flyers.

But at the time I was cross as much with the message as with the messengers and as I marched with the mower up and down the berm, I thought about all the pandemics in human history. Each one must have seemed like the end times to the people involved. Furthermore, people and communities commit terrible atrocities against each other and against other communities and none of those have anything to do with the way God operates in our world.

I lamented the limited faith some people have that sees disaster as punishment from God rather than the reality that bad things happen in life as well good things. Then I moved to the rest of the lawn.

Of course, the story of Job has much more to say about such issues and the Gospel reading does not set out to upset people who have had difficult relationships.

Last week, through the story of Esther, we looked at the conflict between legalism and human love and compassion and this week's readings continues that discussion.

We begin the story of Job where the heavenly court agrees to test Job's integrity. Then in our Gospel reading the Pharisees come to test Jesus by posing a legal question in the belief that his compassion will drive Jesus to ignore the law and so discredit himself.

If we read Job right through, we would get to empathise with his suffering and deplore the lack of empathy he receives from his wife and his friends.

Job's friends offer 'pastoral care' by insisting that his suffering is caused by sin so he should confess and seek God's forgiveness. Even if he was not aware of the sin he must have sinned otherwise he would not be suffering.

I was shocked to see an article in the Press about churches that were discouraging their congregations for getting vaccinated because God would protect them. We can speculate about the power such assumptions give to the leadership of such churches and the security the members feel at being separated from a suffering world.

But when someone in the pure unvaccinated group gets sick, do they get the pastoral care that Job got? Are they told they must have sinned even if they didn't realise it?

Are they encouraged, as Job's wife encouraged him, to forget their integrity, curse God and die.

In these difficult times of a worldwide pandemic, we all need to remember that Job held onto his integrity. He was convinced he is blameless and holds to the theological position that in accepting what is good from God he must also accept what is bad.

Certainly, in our Liberal Christian understanding we are less inclined to blame God. In such a faith stream it more acceptable to say that in accepting the good things in life there is also a need to confront the things that go wrong.

Nevertheless, Christians struggle with the concept of a loving God who allows bad things to happen. In fact, there are no easy answers to the question of why bad things happen to good people.

Evolution is a very brutal process, and some people remain Christian by denying evolution while others become atheists in order to support a scientific view of creation. Both those extreme views are most likely wrong and all our attempts to understand God are limited by our humanness.

God is not a divinity that functions through human laws or a limited view of cause and effect. That was the problem with the Pharisees who confronted Jesus seeking support for flawed divorce laws.

Nevertheless, just as we recognise the scientific endeavours to combat covid 19 and the viability of vaccinating and lockdowns it is still important to pray for healing and for healers. Praying unites us with God as communal beings. We are not grouped as in groups and out groups and praying reinforces our connection through God and with each other.

When we pray for healing, we are not only sharing our hope with God, but we are empathising with people's suffering. We are reminding ourselves to be loving, caring and empathic.

We are also opening ourselves to the Spirit's inspiration as we seek ways we can also be part of the healing we hope for. Most importantly pastoral care and prayer can open a sick person's desire to be healed. Serious illness and injury can take away the will to live but time and time again miraculous cures happen because people have a heightened will to live.

As a boy, one of the books I read, listened to on the radio and saw the film was *Reach For The Sky*, the story of Douglas Bader written by Paul Brickhill. Those of us born over 70 years ago were not shielded from the horrors of war even in pacifist families. Furthermore, apart from growing up while her father was fighting in France, my mother had a crush on Kenneth Moore who played Bader in the movie. Therefore, getting her to take me to see the film was easy.

There was one scene where Bader was lying in hospital critically injured through his own stupidity and he heard a nurse in the corridor chastise her noisy companion by saying 'Shush there's a boy dying in there!'

'O no he's not' thought Bader and went on even without legs to fly fighter planes and resist captivity until the Germans finally sent him to Colditz.

Our natural healing process can be driven by our mental state and apart from a youthful defiance and yearning for life knowing that we are loved by others, and by God, can greatly improve our will to live.

That is the pastoral care that hospital chaplaincy plays as part of a hospital's team of healers. There is also a role for chaplains in being beside people when death is inevitable. In fact, we are all called to care for relatives and friends in that situation.

Life inevitably has a conclusion that at some point has to be accepted. We need to recognise that humanity cannot regulate or understand life's inconsistencies. Life simply needs to be lived with love and with empathy for the lives of others.

That is a concept the Pharisees failed to grasp with their limited vision of marriage and the male prerogative to divorce.

Jesus pointed out to them that laws are given by people to deal with human frailty and are not necessarily the way God intends things to be. In coming to grips with

our Gospel text we must also understand that, in the Jewish law of the day, adultery was committed against a husband. It was a crime one man committed against another for which the woman was punished.

Jesus makes the point that the man who constrains his wife by such a law but discards her for some trivial reason, or has a bit on the side, is equally guilty of adultery.

But each Gospel contributes to the total Jesus story, and we need to remember that in John's Gospel Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery. (John 8: 11) Loving forgiveness brings new beginnings for both men and women.

Events in Afghanistan remind us that male centred understanding of adultery is still the case in many cultures today and women lose their lives because of it.

Reports of court proceeding in our own land remind us that some male focussed vision of relationships still produces violence and suffering. Women in our world who flee from violent relationships are most at risk of being murdered by their partners, after they leave the relationship.

Jesus dealt with that reality by expanding the human given right to divorce by opening the possibility for women to divorce their husbands. Neither is an ideal situation, but humanity is not divine.

Central to God's love is forgiveness and new beginnings. It is not God's will for men or women to have their chance for new beginnings taken away by poisoned relationships. The God we image in Jesus Christ does not expect men or women to be restricted to violent or abusive relationships by fear for their lives.

What is most important to remember about this passage is that it shows a debate with antagonists. Therefore, we must understand this text in the context of the whole Gospel. A Gospel in which Jesus presented a God of freedom, grace and new beginning.

The God we image in Jesus Christ is a God who recognises human weakness and assures us of new beginnings and freedom from whatever slavery life, or other people impose upon us.

To live in the realm of such a God does not require legalism. Nor is it about ignoring danger and rejecting medical science. It certainly does not involve scoring points through laws designed to find a way to live in community despite human weakness.

To embrace the divine realm requires all of us to embrace the loving acceptance a little child has towards those closest to them