

Readings

Job 23: 1-9 16-17

Mark 10: 17-31

Sermon

This reading from Job is part of the discussion with his friends who point out that God is all seeing and all knowing, and the reason Job is suffering is that he has done something wrong that he isn't admitting. According to his friends if he returns to God, agrees with God and is at peace with God, then God will restore good fortune.

Job's answer in this passage is to plead that if that is true then he wants to meet with God and put his case. To hear the charge against him in the heavenly court because he is wrongly accused and, as God is just, Job is sure he can sort it out.

Job's friends on the other hand want him to accept a plea bargain so he can get on with his life but Job is insistent on a hearing to prove his innocence.

This conflict between Job's friends and the presence of an unapproachable God also makes the point that, admitting guilt is unlikely to help because as Job is not guilty, there must be another reason for his suffering and although understanding may not prevent his suffering it may bring peace of mind.

The advice of Job's friends is solid 'prosperity gospel' complete with the unfortunate implications for the poor. If you are faithful to God then you will receive health, wealth and happiness and the dark side of that assumption is that if you are suffering or poor then you must have done something to deserve it, God is displeased with you. Under the prosperity gospel it is bad to have social welfare and universal health care because the poor and the sick deserve their plight. If they followed God's law, prayed and worked hard, they too would be prosperous.

My sister-in-law recently sent me a book called *The Tyranny of Merit*¹ in which Michael J. Sandel, an American philosopher, critiques the obsession with achievement that drives parents to send their children to extra tuition. The quest for salvation through merit even drives them to bribe top universities to accept their children so they will succeed in life.

Having read the book I always enjoy the commercials for trade training where the frustrated father is devastated that his son won't go to university because he wants to be a builder. I also remembered those commercials when I watched the program where a British builder was finding things a bit tough because of the pandemic so he wanted to sell his luxury helicopter to a pawnbroker.

Interestingly Sandel compared this idea of individual success through merit with the prosperity gospel. He points out in the book that the downside of a meritocracy. and the prosperity gospel, is that those who don't succeed in such a competitive world are seen fail through their own fault. Therefore, they don't deserve any sympathy or support.

¹ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Australia: Allen Lane, 2020)

In fact, a caring community would only discourage them from trying. Likewise, the prosperity gospel agrees with the friends of Job who believe that those who fail economically or through illness have upset God in some way.

Sandel asks the all-important philosophical question in the subtitle of his book ‘What’s become of the common good?’

Unfortunately, Sandel’s book is about asking questions not giving answers, which is a bit disappointing. Likewise, Job is crying out for answers while our Gospel reading introduces an economic element to that quest, which is the main focus of Sandel’s book. In the American meritocracy, those with merit make lots of money.

But Jesus did not seem particularly impressed with the status of the rich man and challenged him to divest his wealth. That confounded those listening to the conversation.

On their website the United Church of Christ in the US addresses that issue by stating that Christians measure the economy against one fundamental truth. ‘The earth and all that is in it belongs to God’. The text they use to back up that claim is the first verse of Psalm 24: ‘The earth is the LORD’S and all that is in it. The world, and those who live in it’. (Psalm. 24:1).

In an article on their website, they further suggest that the divine instruction on gathering the manna in the desert supports this faith-based view of the economy. This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents. (Exodus 16: 16-18) ²

If what these texts suggest is true God provides enough for everybody. Therefore, it is the human exploitation of the world’s resources that corrupts the divine order and creates the situation where the rich get richer and the poor, not only get poorer, but also become more numerous.

Job’s friends have suggested that his suffering is caused by his sin, and he replies to that suggestion in today’s reading by proclaiming his innocence. Furthermore, he demands a hearing in the divine court but in so doing Job accepts his friend’s cause and effect logic.

We can also see a cause-and-effect logic in the process where people exploit the world’s resources for profit rather than their personal needs.

The Exodus command was to gather as much as each person needs, each for their own tent. In other words, each person is given permission to gather enough for their own family or household. However, when the motive is profit rather than need, future generations are at risk. Profit becomes wealth that is stored, reinvested, spent on a bigger house or a helicopter and more significantly gives the wealthy power over other people. It can therefore be argued that such excessive use of natural resources is against the divine plan and therefore in religious terms—sinful.

However, although sin might be seen to cause suffering in that example it is not the exploiter who suffers. In many cases it is the environment or people who have been exploited that suffer for the sins of others.

All across the globe in our world today people find themselves in solidarity with Job in demanding justice. The world is filled with people who find it impossible to gain a hearing in the heavenly

² http://www.ucc.org/justice_economic-justice_what-is-economic-justice

court. Such people increasingly look to armed aggression and a hopeless self-destruction in the hope of also destroying those who exploit them. In such a court of hopelessness and thrust for revenge everyone is likely to suffer.

This vision of hopelessness connects with our Gospel reading with the rich young man who seeks to be part of the divine realm but can't leave his wealth behind.

It is easy to see this passage as divine legislation that proclaims socialism and certainly people like Francis of Assisi saw it that way and sought a godly life by rejecting wealth. Ironically the organisation that grew from his example became extremely wealthy.

Likewise, Mother Teresa chose to live in poverty and provided a witness of caring for the uncared for to the world. Renouncing wealth is of course not limited to Christianity and is a tradition in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Gandhi, who was most likely touched by all three of those traditions but embraced none, changed the history of India through self-inflicted poverty and nonviolent protest.

Marcus Borg, writing as a middle-class Christian scholar, puts this passage into a perspective that can be indorsed even by comfortable Presbyterians.

Borg suggests that we would imagine the rich man is asking Jesus what he must do to get to heaven. But he goes on to say that the Greek phrase translated as 'eternal life' in Jesus' time was understood as the 'life of the age to come'—a transformed earth, or the kingdom of God.

So, the man is asking about God's realm on earth.³

Borg further adds that Jesus' comment that no one can serve two masters was initially a comment about the wealthy in the historical world of Jesus. Then Borg goes on to say:

Wealth and indifference to suffering caused by it went together. And of course, the same is true in our world. In the first century wealth could easily become a preoccupation, a snare, a cage. The wealthy were part of the ruling elite at the top of the domination system—the wealthiest one to two percent of the population who set the system up so that one-half to two-thirds of the production of wealth from the peasant class flowed to them. In that world, if you were wealthy, you were a collaborator with the domination system or at least complicit with it.⁴

Some time ago the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted the gap between the rich and the poor in our world today keeps on widening. They reported that in their 34 member states, the richest 10% of the population earn 9.6 times the income of the poorest 10%.⁵

Even more startling, anti-poverty charity Oxfam claimed that billionaires added an average of \$2.5 billion to their collective fortunes every day in 2018. That brought their share of the world's wealth to \$1.4 trillion. That is the same amount of wealth controlled by the world's poorest 3.8 billion people.⁶

³ Marcus Borg *The Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg-New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), p.82.

⁴ *ibid.*, 84.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-32824770>

⁶ <https://www.businessinsider.com/worlds-richest-billionaires-net-worth-2017-6?r=AU&IR=T#10-michael-bloomberg-1>

So, our world is not terribly different to the world of Jesus. Certainly, we live in a democracy, at least in the Western World, but extreme wealth has a tremendous influence on the democratic process and on those seeking to be elected. Furthermore, those who feel left out of the good things of life often feel so marginalized that they don't vote, although if they did, they would have a profound influence.

For his time Job had wealth and it was his loss of his fortune as much as his illness that perplexed him.

As we relentlessly pursue the common good in the face of a worldwide pandemic we are starting to see discontent among those who feel their privileged entitlement will protect them from even the delta virus and they resent any restriction in movement or activity.

Even more significantly in this time of a housing crisis we have seen that the number of cases climbs rapidly in overcrowded homes. We can therefore shudder at the thought of the body count in the world's poorest nations.

So, Jesus' challenge to the wealthy man is as relevant today as it was then and Covid 19 brings that challenge closer to Job's dilemma,

The Christ commitment to establish a divine realm is a call to honour the common good and it must be a total commitment. The man's wealth prevented him from making that total commitment but, more importantly, it shut him off from understanding the struggles ordinary people had. Furthermore, as a symbol of all the wealthy people throughout history the wealthy man in the gospel's extra share of the world's resources did not take into account that the earth and all that is in it belongs to God.

When people and corporations gather what God provides for profit rather than for need, they become the rich man who cannot be part of the divine realm. Job's friends blamed his suffering on sin. We learn from scripture, from Jesus' world, and from our world, that those who exploit the world's resources sin. But observation teaches us it is the exploited and marginalised that do the suffering.

Nevertheless, we should not feel guilty if our life has turned out well financially. But these passages do call us to recognise that, as Charlie Brown points out 'Although money isn't everything, poverty sucks.'

Reflecting on both these passages should encourage us to seek justice and full health for all regardless of merit.

Furthermore, the pandemic has seen people of extreme merit, knowledge, and skill publicly seeking the common good.

A transformed world that can be recognised as a divine realm is always within reach. As followers of Christ our calling is to reach for such a world and be passionate about bringing a transformed world into reality.