

Readings

Job 38: 1-7

Mark 10: 35-44

Sermon

John Clark was a New Zealand comedian most of us first encountered as Fred Dagg. He crossed the Tasman for better opportunities but self-isolated, not because of Covid 19, but because of his fear of flying. True to his style he avoided the consequences of his fears but collapsed walking. As Melbourne cartoonist Michael Leunig delightfully put it in a tribute poem.

O John you funny Kiwi bloke
Could this be some kind of joke
You went tramping down a track
And didn't bother coming back.

One of the creations of John Clarke in association with Don Watson was to write the screen play for the film 'The Man who Sued God.' Clarke's humour is slightly overshadowed by the lead role being played by Billy Connolly, but the critique of the insurance industry's term 'Acts of God' is pure Clarke.

In fact, Connolly's character and Job have a lot in common. They both want God to front up in court and they both expect justice from such an encounter. Both learn more about the mystery of God, life and the universe instead. Job, as we shall see in a subsequent episode, recovers his health, status and fortune and Connolly's character goes off into the sunset with the woman reporter that follows his court case.

In Job's story the introductory scene in the heavenly court only exists in the imagination of the author. It is written to make the point there is absolutely no possibility that Job brought his suffering upon himself or has done anything to displease God.

The scene is framed in the author's culture of kings and emperors just as Connolly attended an Australian Court to confront church leaders uncomfortably sandwiched between claiming to represent God yet not wanting to admit liability and so devastate their denominations' cash reserves.

Both stories prove we can only imagine God in our own culture as we continue to prove the adage that 'God created humanity in the divine image and humanity returned the compliment'.

The divine response to that compliment is God's response to Job 'Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.' (Job 38:4)

Neither Job or any human has that kind of understanding. Like the author of Job, we can only imagine the divine existence in relation to our own existence which is a grossly inadequate framework to imagine God.

But Job's unflinching faith and his understanding of a just God leads him to expect restoration once his innocence is proved. Instead, he is confronted by the mystery of God, a mystery which is beyond human understanding.

'Who is this that darkens council by words without knowledge?' (Job 38:2) asks the divine voice from the whirlwind. That is indeed a question for anyone who ignores the complexity of the created universe which points to a creator beyond human comprehension and beyond our restricted logic of cause and effect.

Karen Armstrong quotes an unknown Greek writer from the end of the fifth, beginning of the sixth century, who used the pseudonym Denys, who wrote: 'we cannot even say that God 'exists' because our experience of existence is based solely on individual, finite beings whose mode of being bears no relation to 'being' itself'.¹

In this passage from Job the Hebrew poetry takes us back to the beginnings, to the archetypal realities of the universe. God's living presence is exposed, not in damnation or forgiveness, but in the grandeur of primordial activities'²

We are even limited in our understanding of each other by our own world view and experience. Empathy is a learned response that requires us to imagine how we would feel then project that onto others. We cannot feel the pain we might inflict on someone else until we imagine someone inflicting that same pain on us.

But both Job and Job's friends' image of a just and loving God requires God to be fair, to punish Job for wrongdoing or reward Job for virtue. It is an image of fairness from a human perspective.

Such an understanding is both the basis of the prosperity gospel and is probably the reason why it is so popular and seductive. Furthermore, it is centred on the person doing the imagining and takes no account of how being fair to one person might be unfair to others.

From time to time there are front page stories about victims complaining that perpetrators of violent crimes are entitled to legal aid, or in some cases any defence at all. On the other hand, there have been two high profile appeals in the news recently where the original convictions look unsafe. In fact our legal history has some significant cases of injustice.

In John Grisham's novel *The Guardians* the central character is Cullen Post, who is both a lawyer and an ordained minister whose calling is to represent the wrongly convicted, some of whom through poverty are facing execution ³ Only a novel from a master storyteller but based on real injustice and genuine calls to service of the least.

Certainly, if we could guarantee every conviction was fair there would be no need for appeals. But as humans we are poorly placed to judge each other. We are even less able to make assumptions about God, or the finally balanced, infinite creation where life and death are a continuing journey.

In our limited human understanding it is easy to harshly judge a divine creator who places vulnerable life on a cooling, moving, heaving planet and a number of prominent atheists have used such judgment to dismiss the possibility of a loving creator.

¹ Karen Armstrong *The Case For God: What religion Really Means* (London: The Bodley Head 2009), p.125

² N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp.228, 229 quoted in Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999), p.319

³ John Grisham *The Guardians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020)

Such judgments are simply variations on the idolatry of building a god in our own image. For the atheist this is quite ironic because, having imagined a god from their own perspective, they then dismiss their mirror image as implausible.

For the rest of us living on this heaving, evolving globe with the insulating atmosphere subject to terrifying tornadoes and cycles of devastating weather we simply need to ask ourselves if the alternative to living in such an environment is better.

Would we exchange the high points of our life on this unstable earth for the security of oblivion and non-existence? If he had the choice would Job have traded the best of his life to avoid the worst?

That is not as far fetched a question as it sounds because it is a question we regularly make about unborn children.

I was born in 1944, eight years after my parents were married, and one of the reasons for the delay was their reluctance to bring new life into a world of hatred, death and imminent invasion. There have certainly been times when I was disappointed that I was not born earlier. My parents could not participate in some of my activities like younger parents could. Furthermore, death took them from significant points in my life I would have liked to share with them.

However, for me 1944 was exactly the right time to be born and in spite of significant tragedies I wouldn't want to trade what was gained for any number of other possibilities.

As it was, I grew up under the nuclear umbrella where many couples faced, and expressed, the dilemma of bringing children into a world of possible apocalyptic destruction. Instead, we saw the collapse of the Berlin wall and the evolution of new terrors. Now we face a worldwide pandemic, global warming and submarines shadowing each other in the Pacific rather than the Atlantic.

Yet, despite all these horrors, the real tragedy is not a flawed creation, but the way humanity exacerbates the dangers of life through greed and worship of false god's and ideologies.

Many years ago, when my son was doing a degree in geography, he told me that a disaster is when an extreme natural event interfaces with a vulnerable human population.

My theological training leads me to add that extreme natural events are part of the creation process. Therefore, however much we might think creation would be better without flood, fire, plague and earthquake they are undoubtedly part of the process that is beyond our knowing. What is within our knowing is the way our human economic systems, greed and quest for security and power make human populations vulnerable.

People have been crushed in earthquakes because of pilfered reinforcing, cost cutting on cement mix and shoddy engineering. Populations have built on unstable land and died in predictable landslides because they cannot afford homes in the cities of the wealthy.

There is a basic human instinct that drives us to seek our own security at the expense of others which is where James and John were coming from. They had left their homes, in Galilee to follow Jesus. So, they felt that when Jesus' kingdom of God party came to power, they deserved important positions and housing allowances in the capital

Like Job they expected fairness from the God they saw in Jesus. But like we all do they judged God, the only way they could, from their own perspective.

As those who helped to bring a total re-creation of human society, as those who suffered hardship and were even prepared to give their lives for the cause, they expected some perks.

Jesus acknowledged their view of the world where those who are recognised as rulers lord it over others, and become tyrants, but his vision of divine rule is different.

We talk of the patience of Job, but Jesus' vision of divine rule is grounded in the eternal patience of God.

The kingdom of God is a long-term project, a two thousand years and counting project. An eternal call to each and every disciple, including us, to wrestle with their misunderstanding and become a ruler of all by being a servant of all.

It is a 'now and future project' that, like creation itself, is a work in process that involves us in both joy and tragedy, life and death.

Throughout history and in our day to day lives there are people noticed and unnoticed, incidents large and small, and connections beyond our knowing that are building blocks of the divine realm.

Born in 1844, Melvinia was passed on in a will like a chattel at the age of six to be used 'along with her issue and increase.' As a slave girl Melvinia, was unable to prevent being impregnated by an unknown master but we can ask if she must have wondered at the wisdom of bringing children into a world of slaves.

Yet in the wisdom and wonder of God the slave Melvinia Shields' great, great, great, granddaughter Michelle Obama became her nation's first lady and Michelle's husband would win the Nobel Prize for Peace.

We know the Realm of God slipped into our world when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955.

But the realm of God also sprang into reality when schoolgirl Greta Thunberg sat on the steps of her nation's parliament and began a worldwide school climate protest.

Faced with a pandemic, that is becoming more devastating than anything our generation of Western society has experienced, the world's scientists cooperated with each other to create effective vaccines in record time. In Aotearoa microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles put aside her glowing bugs and with cartoonist Toby Morris set out to produce easy to understand explanations of the effects of the virus and the need for vaccination.

Not all of those examples are card carrying Christians. But any disappointment at that realisation only highlights our lack of understanding of the mystery and wonder of God. Because it is in such connections of agony and ecstasy, life and death, moments seen and unseen, that God's realm becomes real, and the process of creation continues.

In celebration of such moments:

'The morning stars sing together
and all the heavenly beings shout for joy'.

(Job 38:7)