

## Sermon Archive 508

Sunday 10 November, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Job 42: 1-6, 10-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I am the version of Job presented to the world through scripture, to engage us with all the questions that grow when bad things happen to good people. I'm the stoic figure who lost everything, suffered sometimes angrily but generally well, and thought out loud along the way (for the benefit of the learning of all who suffer).

My story began with a wager between God and the Satan, the latter of whom appeared sufficiently bored to make a bit of mischief. When God said to him "where have you been", he replied "O, you know, walking up and down, going to and fro". If ever there was an illustration of "idle hands finding the devil's work"! The Satan suggested to God that anyone would fall into cursing God, were things extreme or desperate enough.

Rising to the bait, God offered me up as a kind of experiment. "Torment him", God said, "and see if he curses me". I wasn't privy to any of this, of course. I didn't know what was happening.

Nevertheless, so came to me all the failure of my crops, the loss of my possessions, the death of my family, the infestation of my flesh by sores. Let the spiritual reflection begin!

I need to repeat that I, who am speaking to you now, am Job of the Scriptures. And, the scriptures say that in the end, the point had been proved to the Satan that God and I were good - (even though the Satan departed straight after Chapter One, and never came to witness how the debate ended - like Destruction personified is actually interested in truth! No, Destruction doesn't hang around; it goes off, wandering to and fro, up and down upon the earth, looking for the next trouble to cause.)

Well - I, Job of the scriptures note that the Lord restored my fortunes. I received twice what I had enjoyed before. I got fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. I also got seven sons and three daughters - the daughters being considered the most beautiful women in the land. Scripture says I died a happy man, old and full of days.

That is the well settled Job of the scriptures. In the terms of the book, there's no need to feel like, in the long term, he's been hard done by.

Whether he's a real person is unlikely. He's probably a Hebrew religious thought experiment. But I can tell you, that if a *real* Job existed, who lived in the real world of pain and resentment, then *these* are the sorts of statements that might remain:

1. Thank you for multiplying my wealth. I like the money and gold rings provided. But do you really know what it was like to have to beg in the meantime? And to ponder - where can I live? How will I eat? Do I really need to seek charity from my friends and lose all dignity? And how, afterwards, do I ever reclaim that dignity? Can you erase my failure from the memories of those who saw me? To me, my loss of mana isn't something that money can touch.
2. Thank you, dear God, for my three beautiful daughters, and seven handsome sons, but I still mourn the loss of my earlier children in the tornado that blew down our house. I miss *them*. I love my living children, but miss my dead ones. Can they be replaced?

The end of the Book of Job presents God's best efforts to make things right with Job. The question at the heart of the sermon becomes "how best, after a crime, can 'sorry' be said?" How do you put things right?



I'm not sure what to make of the photo on the front page of the order of service. It comes from December of 1992, when the then Prime Minister of Australia was welcomed to an event hosted by the South Sydney City Council. Paul Keating spoke about the impact that colonisation had had on the indigenous peoples of Australia. He said, of the colonial impact: *"It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me?"*

That's what the Prime Minister said. I wonder what, as these words are being spoken, is going through the mind of the Aboriginal person watching him from behind. What's the expression on his face? I wonder whether he feels he's been invited to "black wash" the event, or whether he is being given hope by what he hears.

Four years after this speech, Paul Keating was succeeded by John Howard who doggedly refused to apologise to Aboriginal people for the deeds that Keating admitted. His refusal gave rise to the "Sorry" movement, which persisted until 2007 when another Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd said sorry. I don't know what Kevin's "sorry" did. No doubt it didn't bring back dead children or loss of mana. Back to the photo, what do you see in the eyes of the Aboriginal person as the white person speaks? Respect? Belief? Hope? Scorn? What has he lost? Hey God of Job, how do you put things right?

Closer to home, Maketu Wharetotara, wrote some words down while he was in custody in Tamaki Makaurau in 1842. Wharetotara was an Auckland based Māori leader, who witnessed the dismantling of his home by the arrival of others. He was the first person to be executed under British rule in our country. He wrote:

*"I am the voice that never leaves you, for what you have done in the past remains ever part of the future. I am here to haunt you. Remember this, and be judicious."*

*During my short life, my world was shattered. It was broken and reshaped by those who had more - those whose "more" made them appealing, whose "more" appeared to give them magical powers. But these people with more had a grave deficiency. They did not perceive the need to live in harmony with the world that had been created and balanced by the gods. To them, the world was a servant - one to be used as they saw fit, to be exploited for their own ends.*

*Such beliefs made them powerful, made them masters. But in the insatiable pursuit of more, they lost all respect for the ways of others. They lost the gift of working alongside others, of taking only what was needed, of using what they required in such a way that it might regenerate again. Their poison has spread across the planet like an evil spore. It has killed the power of the old gods who preached partnership. It has transformed us forever . . .*

I am the voice that never leaves you, for what you have done in the past remains ever part of the future. I am here to haunt you. Remember this, and be judicious."

Well, that was the voice of Maketu Wharetotara. It spoke from a time when all he had was taken away from him - his life included. He never got to see what happened at Parihaka. He never got to see Crown confiscations reduce his people's land ownership fall from 100% to 4.8%. He never got to see John Logan Campbell's obelisk erected on Maungakiekie One Tree Hill, with it's plaques commemorating the now extinct Māori people (that's how it looked in 1940). The question is "how do you put things right after the crime?" A thousand donkeys? New children to replace the lost ones? How does one frame the right kind of "sorry"?

The Restorative Justice movement developed in the 1970s, initially to attend to the needs of victims of crimes, who felt they'd lacked an opportunity to confront those who had offended against them. Victims wanted to vent their feelings. Also in play, though, in the development of the movement, was the recognition that engagement between victim and perpetrator was the key to the perpetrator's development. So long as perpetrators were isolated from the human dimensions of what they'd done, they couldn't grow towards a better way of living. Both victim and perpetrator benefitted from engaging with the truth. The truth, so it was said, could set us free. How do you put things right after the crime? Well, at least you talk about what has happened, and what it's meant.

Today is the Sunday closest to the anniversary of the tragedy of Parihaka, and the question continues to be, after the crime, how are things to be put right? No nation that purports to have a conscience can ignore the question.

In response to the question, here's a wee thought experiment. It's an invitation to consider how the Book of Job might have had a different ending. In the different ending, maybe Job would not have been bought off with some daughters and donkeys. Maybe Job might have been invited to tell God how he missed his old children, and how it felt to have lost his mana in the eyes of his friends. How it felt to be caught up in something that wasn't just - but mind you, most of the Book of Job is Job expressing exactly that. We know what his thoughts were, how confused and hurt he was. Maybe the key to this alternative ending is his realising that God has heard what he's been saying. The thousand donkeys is not so much a "paying off", as it is a "you have been heard; we understand; we do what we can to make it right. Let's learn, and start again . . . We acknowledge the truth, and begin in that acknowledging, together to be free.

On Parihaka Sunday, we are open to the question. May the God of truth lead us forward. A moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.