

8 February 2015

If you want a real flesh-and-blood character from the bible, Job in today's first reading is your man. If you want someone who feels real human pain and doubts the existence of God, Job is your man. If you want someone who is buffeted about in the storms of daily life and feels a bit discouraged, Job is your man. If you want someone who feels abandoned by God and who feels that God no longer listens to his prayers, Job is your man.

I have often said that before the bible touches on a spiritual or religious reality, it first touches something completely and profoundly human. And Job is the man. Here he is asking the key questions about human existence – 'Is daily life nothing more than hired drudgery working endlessly for what reward'? Job feels months of delusion. Lying in bed he asks himself when on earth will it be day. Up and awake, he then wonders why evening comes so slowly. Life passes like a breath or can be excruciatingly long and painful, and believes that his eyes will never again see joy. Job is remarkably open and honest. Today we would say that he is mildly depressed and full of stress.

People often think that the bible is full of make-believe fairy-tales. Yet here is a remarkable and real flesh-and-blood character putting his finger on some of the burning issues of daily life and human existence. And how many times in life have we felt like Job? So why does the Church give us this slightly depressing and sad reading? The answer is in today's responsorial psalm; 'Praise the Lord who heals the broken hearted'. We believe in a God who is close to us in our pain, who hears our prayers, who does not abandon us and leave us captive to the forces of darkness. We believe in a God who is near the suffering of his people, who lifts us up in hope and carries us in love.

Although Job does not know this, in time God would send his Son to embrace our human weakness, to enter fully into the human condition of sadness, brokenness, suffering, heart-ache and even death. Soon we will commence the season of Lent leading us to Easter. All these themes will be before us in a new and radical way. All that Job said and felt, all the experiences in life that we have like Job are a reminder of why Jesus comes, of who he is, of what he does on the cross to embrace our

human suffering, to transform this human suffering and to set our hearts free.

As Pope Francis reminds us, it is easy to believe in God when everything is going well, life is good, everyone is happy and healthy, we have a nice car, nice home and money in the bank. But the test of faith comes when challenges, heart-ache and suffering come our way. The story of faith repeated over and over again in the scriptures is that often in the pain and the darkness, God comes to heal us and bring us the light of faith, it is in those moments that Jesus the Good Shepherd carries us gently home and fills our lives with his love.

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus makes it clear that he is near the poor, the abandoned, the marginalized, the sick and the excluded. Jesus did not spend his time with polite company, with the religious leaders locked away in an academic institute talking about theological theories. No, the Good Shepherd was close to his sheep, in particular the ones who feel lost and abandoned. The people like Job. So as always, the lesson from the scriptures is that there is always hope. As difficult as it is to see and feel, we believe in a God of hope and the Church, especially the parish community, exists primarily to transmit this hope, in baptism we are called to be agents of hope in our daily lives. Let us feel the raw pain and questions of Job deep in our hearts. Let us also feel the power of the risen Lord to heal us and set our hearts free.