

Restored and Reformed - Job 42; Heb 7: 23-28 JGMC Reformation Sunday 28/10/12

I suspect it is not a coincidence that the compilers of the lectionary used Reformation Sunday to conclude, as we do today, our brief look this past month into the Book of Job. The final chapter of Job fits quite well into the celebration of the Reformation of 500 years ago that brought us the Protestant Churches of which our Denomination is a part and in which our Presbyterian heritage was one of the main shapers. Chapter 42 also fits easily into the theme the lectionary gives for today, "Restored and Reformed", though going by the order of the text it might best have been "Reformed and Restored". For before the report of the *restoring*, we find the *reforming*. First with Job saying I *repent* in dust and ashes and then his three friends had to offer a sacrifice and get Job to pray for God to forgive them so the Lord would not deal with [them] according to [their] folly because they had not spoken of God what is right.

But we might ask, as many do, when they look at the *whole* book of Job, why was it necessary for Job to reform, to repent? For right at the start of the book, in Chapter 1, we had found God Himself saying that Job is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil and that there was no one else on earth like him. In fact, God reasserts that assessment of Job again in Chapter 2, after Satan has devastated Job's life by killing all his children as well as destroying all his possessions. At the end of chapter 1, on learning of the deaths of his children we are told that Job tore his robe in grief, shaved his head in mourning and fell to the ground *to worship*. It was from within the grief of a tragedy that would utterly devastate any parent, that we got the first of Job's tremendous testimonies: "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. *Praise* the name of the Lord." And just to make sure we understand fully, the author adds, "In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God." And in Chapter 2 when God for the second time tells Satan of the singularly blameless and upright life of Job, God confirms that Job has maintained the integrity of his faith in God although all this has happened to him *without reason*.

So, it is much easier for us to understand why Job's friends were in need of repentance, needed to be *reformed* and forgiven. Because if we read all that they said to Job we recognise that while they had some great insights and absolute conviction of the goodness and rightness of God, they went too far in blaming Job for having done something that God was punishing him for. Of course, they did not know as we know that God had already said that Job had been harmed "without cause"; so what we can take from them is that we should never think we can explain everything about God. Unless we admit that there are some things we will just never know, we could very well end up not only hurting the person already suffering enough, but also offending God, as these men did. Even some of the explanations on this book that we might accept as being amongst the better can sometimes come across as at least insensitive. I once saw someone explaining that our trouble with the book, and with this general focus on why bad things happen to good people, as it is usually put, is because we have become more concerned with the created than the Creator. I could not understand that. Intellectually, logically, perhaps even theologically. But it certainly didn't seem like something with which I could offer much comfort to a grieving parent.

My mind instead keeps coming back to the repeated image in the Gospels of Jesus, Who told us when we know Him we know God, and the recurring word *compassion*. His compassion for those who had lost a child, or brother, for those seriously ill. So I am not surprised when God breaks into the earthly scene of our story and when He restores Job's fortunes, beyond even what they had been, though I guess we can't overlook the grief. In a recent article on grief, the writer says she thinks she would prefer if in Chapter 42 God would just go poof and everything would go back to how it was before Job's suffering started! A Jewish columnist in the UK Guardian had also written a series of articles a couple of years ago about the Book of Job, with the perspective, as he put it, that unlike us, they are still waiting on their Messiah. He related the story of a terminally ill woman and a Rabbi, from which he said he quickly learned you do not tell someone to read Job in order to help understand news like that. And he references the extermination of 7million Jews, including 1 million children, in the Holocaust. But he is sure that he can cite, as he does, clear evidence of restoration in many forms for the Jews since that unbelievable horror. Thank God. The God who still restores, even in the face of evil beyond our worst nightmares and perhaps beyond even what Job could have imagined.

So maybe one lesson we can take from Job's friends is summed up in that pithy saying, that God doesn't need a lawyer but He just wants a witness ó a witness who need only speak what he is *sure* of. One who will speak with the confidence of our Psalmist today. *õTaste and see that the Lord is good.ö* It may well be that when we are confronted with the usual questions about the story of Job there are parts of it we have to avoid trying to explain it all within our human limitations and refer to St. Paul's explanation of our struggle with *õspiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.ö* But even in that I think we can take comfort in God's confidence in Job. Completely opposite to Satan's cynical view of Job and the human's ability to hold firmly in his faith in God. In chapters one and two we saw that Satan believed that Job was only *exhibiting* loyalty to God and God's righteous precepts because Job had been blessed with such a good life. That is, for what he could get out of it. Satan felt if those good things were taken away Job would *õcurse God.ö* God, instead, held Job in high regard, as a being with the potential for a certain strength of character, who could be depended on. Not because the material success he had achieved in life meant that Job was naturally able to do great things, but because of the depth of his faith in God. In fact, we know from countless examples that are recounted from both history and current times that persons with very little material means often demonstrate greater conviction in God than many of their *õsuccessfulö* contemporaries. From Jesus's observation, we know that God recognises that true faithfulness does not depend on whether we are rich or poor materially but whether we recognise we are poor in Spirit and need to trust in God. No wonder Job would later ask, like the Psalmist, why would God think so highly of us humans. We might not understand the role of a human like Job in these cosmic battles but it is quite something that God ó the Almighty ó has confidence in us.

If your Bible has an introduction to the book of Job, it might give an explanation like this one from an NIV Study Bible, *õIn summary, the author's pastoral word to the godly sufferer is that his righteousness has such *supreme value* that God treasures it more than all.*

And the great adversary knows that if he is to thwart the purposes of God he must assail the righteousness of man. At stake in the suffering of the truly godly is the outcome of the struggle in heaven between the great adversary and God, with the all-encompassing divine purpose in the balance. It is very noticeable also that in all that God said to Job and his friends in the last few chapters of the book, God did not explain the cause of Job's suffering. We also have seen Jesus' answer in St. Luke about tragedies like when a leader killed a bunch of his citizens or when a number of people were killed by a falling tower, incidents with striking similarities to tragic events of our own times. "Do you think that these (people) were worse sinners than the others in those places?" Jesus asked. "I tell you *no*." But once again Christ did not give an explanation of why those people suffered those particular earthly tragedies. Elsewhere, Jesus simply assured us that "those who mourn, will be comforted" it is only in the new life to come that there will be no more suffering. So what Jesus did do was warn His questioners about what should be their *greater* concern, just as it was *His* overriding concern for *them*, their risk of the loss of that new, *eternal* life: "But unless you repent, *you too* will all *perish*."

"Repent. Reform." So that brings us back to the point on Job himself today, as to why he too had to repent, since God had said at the outset that he was blameless. Though I don't want to come off like Job's friends by trying to find all the answers, the answer can perhaps be found in some of what Job said, in his very understandable anguish, in the long discourses with his friends. Firstly, though he was confident in how well he had revered God and championed justice and mercy as God requires, the main thrust of his lament on the extent of his suffering was not that he was *sinless* but that his sins were not proportionate to the suffering he had received and was still receiving, if the suffering was indeed punishment, or even disciplining. Job and his friends shared with us that common belief that God is absolutely good and holy and does not act arbitrarily and heartlessly, as non-believers say would have to be the case if there really is a God as we say there is. But they saw suffering as a way of God disciplining people not to sin and punishing them for continued sinning. Job's friends, in what they considered their defence of God, therefore were convinced that Job had sinned (and/or his children) and he should just admit it and seek forgiveness. Job was equally convinced he was not as bad as they were making him out to be, even if God were still punishing him for what he termed the sins of his youth, so there had to be more to it than that. And so the arguments went on, chapter after chapter, with no conclusion until God stepped in directly and spoke to them. But Job had acknowledged it was not that he had never in his life committed a sin of any kind. So God's words to Satan may be seen in that light, that Job was held as *blameless*, though as we know from the New Testament, Jesus was the only *sinless* person.

Secondly, like his friends had done, Job in his anguished laments had no doubt said more than he should have said, though he never "cursed God". It is said that some of his arguments were probably sailing close to the wind. And he does seem to be particularly obsessed with God showing his friends and the world that he, *Job*, was not being punished because he had been wicked and ungodly. In 13:15 he declares, "Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him; *I will surely defend my ways to His face*." And in that great verse 19:25 Job declares, "I know my Redeemer lives." Amen.

Yet we are told that the rest of that verse, "and that in the end He will stand upon the earth" means stand *to* defend and vindicate *me*. I know we pray never to be in Job's shoes. His children were gone, he had lost everything he had owned, he was terribly sick and disfigured, even the rest of his family and friends were turning away from him. All he had left to cling to was his conviction that he had lived faithful to God and His precepts, which he saw as having shaped and defined him. So we can understand his yearning for God to affirm him to those who now mocked him and condemned him. But we have to watch that tendency to become focused on ourselves, to see everything centred on me, *me*, even in a case as sympathetic as Job's. And so we find in 40:8 God confronting Job, "Would you discredit My Justice? Would you condemn *me* to justify *yourself*?"

So, when Job finally got his opportunity to talk to God, as he had cried out to do over and over, and after he had heard from God, he realised once again the unfathomable difference between humans and God and the severe limitation on our ability to comprehend it all. And Job could only say, "I am unworthy – how can I reply to You? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." And so Job himself sees his need to repent, despite the upright and God fearing life he had indeed lived.

Like Job, it is still the only thing we can do when we have that experience of God that Job had, when we today heard him say, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you." We can hear about God, even admire His precepts, and long to follow the example of Jesus in how to live. But when we really *see* God, as Job did, not physically, but through the eyes of faith in an encounter where we are overtaken by that spiritual experience and understanding of Him as not only Creator and Redeemer, but truly our *Lord*, then we realise we can only *repent*. Repent and *live*, as God repeatedly called upon the Israelites to do. Repent and take hold of the *abundance* of *eternal* life that Jesus called us *all* to accept from His outstretched, wounded hands.

And that is why on this Reformation Sunday we truly need to celebrate Job having been *reformed* and the fullness of his life being *restored* to him by a loving God Who gave him back twice the riches he had been given originally. And celebrate the reforming and restoring action of the reformed Job, who, we read, granted his new daughters "an inheritance along with their brothers". That was unlike the general practice in that area and in many major countries throughout much of recorded history, and as still persists in some places where even today women do not share equal rights.

But we also need to truly celebrate and also renew our commitment to the reformation of the Christian church 500 years ago, driven by Martin Luther with his 95 Theses of what the Church was doing wrong and what it should actually do. In our case, we are focused particularly on the Reformation that gave birth to the Protestant movement and the Reformed tradition whose motto, "Reformed and always being reformed," can itself help us to understand the need for Job to repent, to be reformed. But as an aside we might also want to acknowledge the Catholic Reformation that also took place in the 1500s.

Without the Church having been reformed both into the new Protestant church and the continuing but *changed* Catholic Church, which also then sought to address much of the practices that had been corrupted and led to the split, we wonder what the Christian religion would look like today. Thankfully we again saw the power and mercy of God at work, stepping in and offering *restoration*, after repentance and reformation.

But much remains to be done, as always. The wisdom of our Reformation motto acknowledges this. God and His goodness and righteousness and the depth and breadth of His love which drives His caring concern into all areas of human life, is the same today as it was when tragedy befell Job; and as it was when the painful Church split of the 1500s gave birth to the Protestant Church. But even without any battles in the spiritual realms, the vagaries of human life and our weaknesses would lead us to continue to corrupt the church and other institutions and practices through which God seeks to work His purpose out, unless we acknowledge our continuous need for reformation. To repent and be *re*-formed into what God intended. The stern warning of Jesus in Revelation 2 to the Church in Ephesus to *ō*repent and do the things you did at first *ō* are as critical for us today as it was then and as it was when the church had to be reformed 500 years ago. Do what you did as a newly formed church filled with the excitement and anticipation of carrying out Christ's commandment to spread and live the Gospel. Go back to the basics of that first church in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit baptised the first Believers waiting there as Jesus had commanded them. The basics of the *grace of God*, that tenet of the Church which the Reformers 500 years ago championed as the *only means* to salvation, while they condemned the individuals within the church who had corrupted it with the selling of indulgences to deal with the fear of purgatory and punishment, that problematic subject also for Job's friends.

Of course, the Reformation was about more than that. And our need to continue to be reformed is still about more than that. But as people around the western world increasingly drift away from the Church once again, we recognise the need for it to be *restored* by Christ to growth and newness. Therefore the church needs to reform in order to sharpen its message that fulfilment will not be found through riches or punishment or people thinking they can set their own rules and become their own gods. Only by the grace of God through the crucified Christ. The Church needs to reform so we can get those people to *listen* to our message, that *good news* Christ directed us to disseminate to *all* people. The Reformers of 500 years ago realised that meant tackling all kinds of issues. Luther saw then an opportunity to bring people closer to their faith by also promoting the use of *music*, which he believed was a gift from God that could *inspire* and *teach*. He was apparently also a talented musician and moved to provide joyful songs the *whole congregation* would sing, a big change for the church then. Yet still today music can often be a source of dissension in the Church, as individual preferences are so diverse. So the church must be always reforming so that our music is still able to draw in, inspire and teach more of those people who right now are instead using that as an excuse for not hearing the Gospel. While at the same time we must ensure that our emphasis doesn't turn our *focus away from God* to the *ō*meō, as some feel many of today's lyrics overemphasise, a risk we looked at in Job's struggles.

The Church also needs to keep on reforming to ensure we properly tackle the social injustices that pained the righteous heart of Job in chapter 24. Many are essentially the same as in Job's time, as certain workers go hungry and thirsty because of unjust practices, the weak are taken advantage of, and the burglar and adulterer both spread pain. But current laws and practices will require approaches that are effective *now*.

However, as it was in that first church in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, and in the Church of Ephesus that had lost its love, and the church before the reforms of the 1500s, the Church is *us*. If the Church is going to be effective, we the individuals have to be reformed. We as individuals, though working together as one body, have to be resolved to live as God wants us to live, following His precepts in both righteousness and love, addressing the injustices on others as Job did in his day, and offering Christ to those who feel there is no hope, or that they have done things that can only bring punishment from God. Job pleaded in anguish, "how can a person be declared innocent in God's sight?" God provided the answer. *Jesus* - the great high priest, as our text from Hebrews today assures us, Who sacrificed once for all who believe in Him, providing a glorious eternity even when we feel we do not deserve it.

Trust in the God Who believed in Job, or, to borrow the title of Dr. Robert Schuller's book, "Believe in the God Who believes in *You*." Are you willing to do this? Amen