

Job 5 B

Now I realise that I should resist the temptation to become a grumpy old man; but I have to admit to my personal preference to see the glass half empty rather than half full. I suppose I would justify my pessimism by claiming that I am realistic in seeing the flaws and difficulties of life. And honesty about our situation can never be wrong.

G K Chesterton has a lovely reflection on optimists and pessimists and the explanation that ...

the optimist thought this world as good as it could be, while the pessimist thought it as bad as it could be. Both these statements being obviously raving nonsense, one had to cast about for other explanations. An optimist could not mean a man who thought everything right and nothing wrong. For that is meaningless; it is like calling everything right and nothing left. Upon the whole, I came to the conclusion that the optimist thought everything good except the pessimist, and that the pessimist thought everything bad, except himself. It would be unfair to omit altogether from the list the mysterious but suggestive definition said to have been given by a little girl, "An optimist is a man who looks after your eyes, and a pessimist is a man who looks after your feet."

Actually both parts of that little girl's insight are worth mulling over. To move beyond the stale debate over pessimists and optimists, we do need to look after our feet – or at least see the reality of the ground upon which we walk but we also need to look up with a vision of what should be and a confidence in what will be.

I say all this because we have been given as our Old Testament reading one of the most pessimistic readings in whole bible. And yet Job is for most of the story in the book of Job an optimist. However, the reading we have today shows him having reached the end of his tether, he is in despair. He is only too well aware at this stage of the profoundly difficult and troubled ground upon which he walks, and yet, elsewhere in the story he does have a vision of what should be and a confidence in what will be.

Job has a moan. And let us be fair: Job has had a lot to moan about. Despite being a good person, bad things have happened to Job. It is a very regrettable reality that bad things do happen to good people. And yes, when those bad things happen, those good people need all the resources of their goodness. Job in the story has things very bad. His family has been lost to him, he has suffered economic ruin, he has endured illness. No wonder he feels that there is nothing to look forward. He is indeed one of the 'broken-hearted' we read about in the Psalm.

The Book of Job is an exquisite dramatic treatment of the problem of the suffering of the innocent. It is a truth that when we think of great works of literature or drama it is the tragedies which stand out, comedies seem light and fluffy, tragedy touches something deep. And the book of Job is a literary masterpiece. Job is not history, it is a parable, an extended story, but in the story we touch profound realities.

It explores the reality of injustice in the world. It takes seriously the struggles of human living. Job even has friends who give him consistently bad advice, offering inadequate explanations for his troubles. And yet, there is no easy answer to the difficult questions raised by Job. In the midst of terrible and negative happenings two positives provide some

balance. The first is the extraordinary acceptance that the person of Job eventually comes to. The second is that ultimately the measure of God is not the measure of man: God's wisdom transcends our limitations.

There is a powerful spiritual virtue in acceptance, the finding of an inner serenity which acknowledges and knows true difficulties but is not defeated by them. To be sure there is an unhealthy sort of quietism which can ignore injustices and wrongs which should be engaged with and put right. Yet it is also a truth that in every awkward or difficult situation we face that decision whether we master those difficulties or we let those difficulties master us. One of the admirable qualities of Job is that he maintains his integrity despite his misfortunes.

There is an ambiguous thing known as 'detachment'. Ambiguous because there is that sort of detachment which is blocking off pain, refusing to accept things which must be accepted or just distancing oneself from people and things. That can be both inhumane and dehumanising. We must feel: but there is a prayerful sort of detachment which truly feels without being overwhelmed by the feelings. It is allowing the feelings to be, but not to be destructive. It is to name, accept and manage those feelings. To put oneself in a place where you can deal with the issues they force upon you.

But let us go back to the Psalm. The promise in the Psalm is the Lord will heal the broken hearted. The Lord will bring back the exile, he will bind up the wounds of the injured. His Divine wisdom is greater than the troubles of our humanity. The Divine compassion reaches into the depth of our hurts.

This leads into our Gospel passage. One of the major elements of the ministry of Jesus was to enter into the difficult parts of our humanity and bring healing.

God knows our troubles.

God knows the wounds we carry, the hurts, the disappointments and frustrations.

And it is the will of God that our wounds be bound. God's wisdom will transcend our limitations.

We do need the grace of God to aid us. We need the love of God in Christ to offer us healing and wholeness of all those things which are beyond our choice or control.

The promise is before us even as difficult and troubled realities impact upon us.

Hoping in that promise we can find that healthy acceptance, that hope grounded in the faithfulness of God towards us which can make us faithful despite the troubles we face. May we see the reality of the ground upon which we walk but may we also have a healing vision of what should be and a confidence in what will be. The true reality is bigger than our present hurts and frustrations: the ultimate reality is the wisdom and love of God.