

# **Sermon on Sunday 3 October 2021**

## **by Rev. Alan Stewart**

*(Readings: Job 2. 11-13; Mark 10. 13-16)*

### **Scars**

Scars. I happen to have quite the collection, ranging from scratching my cheek aged 2 hours to slicing my finger aged 3 years. There's also the removed appendix aged 7, the dislocated hip at 13, and then, my most recent acquisition; a sizeable abscess on my forearm, aged 53. As the cause of this latest scar remains something of a mystery, I've decided that I need a better story. So, if people ask, it's from a drive-by stabbing where heroically I saved the life (and handbag) of a Carmelite nun. If you can furnish me with a more exciting anecdote, of course, answers on a postcard, please.

Not all scars, of course, are visible.

Someone who knew about both kinds was Job, whose story is not only the oldest in the Bible, but also one of the most perplexing.

In a nutshell, Job is introduced as the pinnacle of righteousness; God's star-player. So, in order to test Job's integrity and motivation, a shadowy accuser or satan (small s), manages to convince God to put Job on trial. 'Take everything away from him,' he taunts, 'and see if your golden boy still wants to worship You'. It reads like a cruel cosmic experiment but, at its heart, there is,

of course, an important question: Do we only serve God for what we get out of it?

The first thing I need to say is that, clearly, this is a fable or parable. We shouldn't for one moment use it to deduct anything about the character of God or how divine or cosmic relationships play out. That wasn't why it was written and this is certainly not the God I recognise in Jesus. Nor, in my opinion, for what it's worth, is it proof of a personal being called Satan (capital S).

Often, the story of Job is interpreted as a meditation on the nature of suffering. Personally, I've never found that helpful. I have, however, found the story profoundly helpful in thinking about the nature of prayer. More of that later.

Back to the story: Job loses everything; family, wealth, reputation, his health. And we're left with this distressing image of him sitting in the dirt scraping his sores with broken pottery, his own wife telling him to give up; 'Curse God and die'.

Hearing of Job's trauma, three friends arrive. And, bless them, to begin with they do exactly the right thing. They sit with him in solidarity in the dirt for seven days and seven nights without saying a word.

Anyone who has experienced grief or trauma will know the power of redemptive listening. As Richard Rohr says: 'One can't ultimately provide the answers for others. All we can do is walk

with the other, and help others rightly hear themselves, to be there'.

And then, the friends blow it. They begin to correct Job, theologising about why this might be happening. It's the equivalent of that awful platitude, 'God has his reasons'.

And, thankfully, Job is having none of it. He confronts God head-on. He rails and he rages and he wrestles against the injustice of it all.

And, for some of us, perhaps, it makes for uncomfortable reading. It's just not how we're trained to address God. Again, Richard Rohr writes: 'During Job's crisis, he yells at God, accuses God of all kinds of things, speaks sarcastically, and almost makes fun of God. "If this is a game you're playing, then you're not much of a God! I don't need you and I don't want you!" It's this kind of prayer,' says Rohr, 'that creates saints.' He goes on to say, 'We can't pray with that authority unless we know something experientially about God. We can't pray that way unless we are assured at a deep level of the profound connection between ourselves and God'.

Saints are made in the wrestling with God. That's reassuring, I think, for those of us who do.

Ron Rolheiser tells of a religious community that once tried to sanitise the Psalms, to remove all references to anger, violence

and vengeance. Stripped of that, 'What resulted,' he says, 'was something that looked more like a Hallmark Card than a series of prayers that express real life and real feelings. We don't always feel upbeat, generous, and faith-filled. Sometimes we feel angry, bitter, and vengeful. We need to be given sacred permission to feel that way (though not to act that way) and to pray in honesty out of that space.'

This sacred permission to be brutally honest in prayer is essential if we are to go deeper into knowing God and knowing ourselves.

Later, just as one of Job's well-meaning friends embarks on a long hymn of praise to God's omnipotence, God steps in to effectively shut him up. And instead of answering Job's questions, asks his own: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' he says.

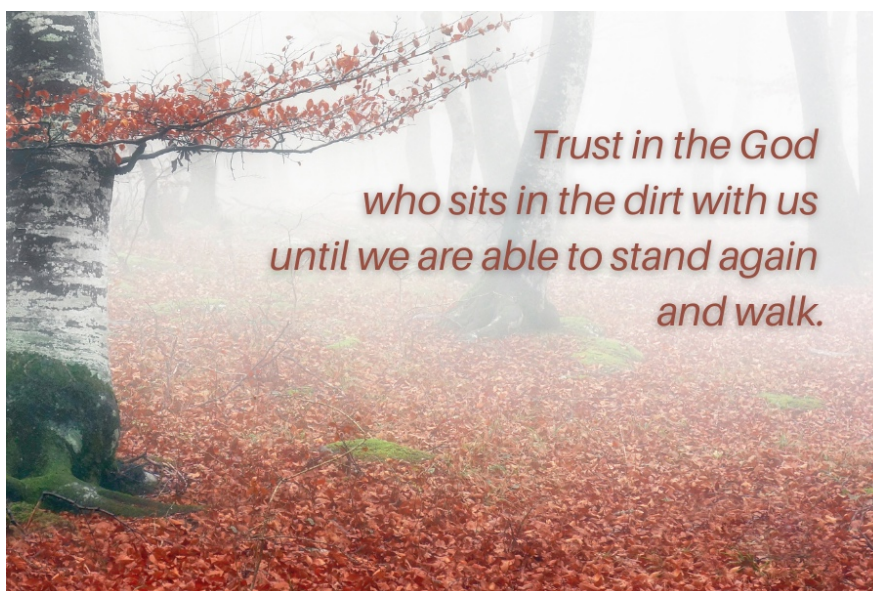
God takes the focus from individual introspection to a cosmic eye-view. It's as if he lifts Job onto his shoulders and shows him a greater perspective. And, somehow, Job gets it and finds strength to stand up from the dirt and move faithfully forward.

Ultimately, this tale reminds us that God does not promise salvation from anxiety and suffering, but offers salvation within them. It reveals that God cannot really be known through theology and law. God can only be *related* to and known in relationship. We know God by loving God, trusting God, and placing our hope in God. We cannot 'think' God. God is not an answer but a presence.

Job teaches us that we can speak frankly to God. And speaking frankly, I don't really trust this early caricature of God. I refuse to believe in a cosmic puppet master pulling the strings of the universe, testing us through suffering. I do, however, wholeheartedly trust in the character of God we discover in the person of Jesus.

I heard recently of someone who has self-harmed much of their life, and part of their recovery has been discovering the God with scars; the God of suffering love. Post-resurrection, Jesus revealed to his friends the scars of his love, in hands and feet. And I believe he took those scars into eternity as forever symbols of a forever love.

Faith in this God means being willing to speak honestly, to live without answers, to trust in the God who sits in the dirt with us until we are able to stand again and walk.



## Job 2 11-13

**11** When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. **12** When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. **13** Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

## Mark 10 13-16

**13** People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. **14** When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. **15** Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." **16** And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.