

## Our Seeking, God's Finding

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 14 October 2012, by David Gill. The readings were Job 23:1-9,16-17 and St Mark 10:17-31*

We have just been presented, in our readings, with two people. Both are sincere. Both are religious. And both are engaged in the search of their lives.

They are two very different individuals, in contrasting circumstances, propelled into their searches for markedly different reasons. But the quests of both Job and the rich man are desperately serious. They are, for both men, nothing less than attempts to find a way to God.

Take our first reading. Job is trying to make sense of human suffering – his own being the case in point. Reputed to be “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil,” he is not only a wise and virtuous man but evidently a wealthy one as well, with a large family, land and herds.

All that changes, with a series of calamities. Job loses his children, wealth and flocks. Then his health goes too. His misery is abject. How to make sense of such disasters? Popular notions of why the innocent suffer, why bad things happen to good people, are of no help at all. For Job, such attempts to explain the inexplicable are simplistic. They cut no ice.

So what to do? Where to turn? He wants to turn to God, to argue his case as one might argue a case before an earthly judge. But where is this God? “O that I knew where I might find him,” he cries, “that I might come even to his dwelling!”

He searches, but cannot find. He looks, but cannot see. He cries out, but receives no answer. The holy One eludes him. God is in hiding. Or so it seems.

[Every age has its versions of Job. When an undersea earthquake off the coast of Sumatra produced that terrible tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, exactly the same questions about the mysterious purposes of an elusive God were heard from all over the region and beyond, from people of all faiths and of none].

[Indeed, every life has its Job-like moments. Loss, trauma, heartbreak. When personal tragedy strikes in any form, those age-old questions reappear. If only I could understand. If only I could make some sense of it. O that we knew where we might find him.]

Then there was our second reading. A man, apparently wealthy, runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he wants to know. A good question, for it echoes the divine purpose for humanity. He’s asking the right person too, and evidently with great respect for his authority. Full marks, so far.

You know the commandments, says Jesus, reminding him of what’s at the heart of the Jewish law. I do, says the man, and I’ve kept them since my youth. Sounds better and better.

Jesus, we’re told, loved him. But Jesus also spots something missing, some flaw in his understanding of God’s will. Go, he says, sell what you own, give to the poor and follow me. What was missing was compassionate action for the poor. Without that, the man’s quest for God was going to get him nowhere.

[Those who think the church today should join the political chorus against asylum seekers, stay quiet about economic injustice and keep its distance from the forgotten and the despised, please take note!]

So -- two seekers. One comfortable amidst his prosperity, the other whose world was collapsing around him. One wanting to argue with God, another craving God’s acceptance. Both sincere, both driven by deep yearning, both finding that an elusive God remains beyond their grasp.

Those two seekers, my friends, are us. In one form or another, their yearning, their search, their experience, is ours too.

For we mortals are meaning-seeking animals. Something deep within us cannot rest content with the shallowness of the passing parade, the emptiness of the here and now. Some years ago there was a song on the charts that mused about

life's experiences with the recurring line "Is this all there is?" To that key question humanity shouts its resounding "No!"

That's why religion in one form or another remains, indelibly, part of us. Those haunting questions will not leave us alone. That ultimate search keeps reasserting itself. The wonder of life, and our built-in capacity for wondering, will not go away. True, many today seem eager to announce the death of religion. But experience suggests that whenever faith in one or another of its great historic manifestations goes out the door, a quirkier substitute is almost sure to come crawling in through the window. Even in secularized 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

The wondering, the yearning, the searching goes on. And the One to whom it is directed remains ever before us and beyond us.

Sometimes, alas, people forget the beyond-ness of God. A few years ago, one of the journals of the Uniting Church published an article about wondering – or, rather, about a failure to wonder. The writer described an encounter he had witnessed between a fundamentalist Christian and a rabid atheist. Absolute opposites, one might suppose. Not so, observed the author. Each had come armed with watertight arguments, all bolstered by proof texts and reinforced by supporting literature.

"What shocked me most," said the writer, "was the shared lack of wonder or astonishment. 'Puzzled about the cosmos and its nature? Let me exorcise that astonishment! I have all the answers – neat, tidy and conclusive answers that only a twisted mind or a sinful soul could conceivably reject! Just read my books and you know it all ...'."

Know-it-all religion – and there's an awful lot of it around at the moment – gives Christianity a bad name. It also loses the church a lot of friends – people who might be ready to join us in genuine seeking but, understandably, won't have a bar of smug, self-satisfied religious dogmatism.

Faith is not certainty. It is reaching out in trust, hope and love towards the Mystery that remains before and beyond us.

Faith's journey is not one of ease. It may have moments of comfort, even ecstasy, but there will be tough times in the wilderness as well. It may offer flashes of insight, but expect to be crying "My God, why have you forsaken me?" as well.

So it is fortunate that those who seek God do not have to travel alone. We are invited to journey in company. In company with the Church – not just this church, at this time, in this place, but the whole Church of all times and places. Inspired by its memories, guided by its wisdom, nourished by its sacraments, upheld by its prayers, enriched by its experience, held in its strong arms whenever our own efforts falter.

We have another companion too, of course. Unseen and often unknown. The Bible speaks not only of our attempts to reach out towards God. It also, and more importantly, testifies to God's persistence in reaching out towards us. The One whom we seek is none other than the One who long ago found us, who in Christ died for us and who has made each of us his own..

To our wondering eyes, the divine Mystery must remain always elusive. But that Mystery from which we sprang, which encompasses all our days yes and all our nights too, remains our sure and certain journey's end.

TS Eliot said it well.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we first started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning.*

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