

Sermon preached St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street Sydney 18th October 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: Job 38:1-7 (34-41); Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45.

Confronting Chaos with God

You and I can recall experiences of calamity, both domestic and economic. Job had a catastrophic stripping away of all that he thought secure and settled. He had thought his future was to be a continuation of the profitable, rewarding past. It vanished overnight, leaving him devastated. “We bring nothing at birth; we take nothing with us at death. The Lord alone gives and takes. Praise the name of the Lord!” (1:31).

These words were first grounded for me when I was fourteen. My sister, Saxon, aged twenty-eight, married with two children, was electrocuted. A cow had kicked loose a power lead on a wet concrete floor of a milking shed. She picked up the lead and life ended. That was January 1955.

Her husband and brother who owned the farm, could not bear to live there, sold the farm, and took up other occupations. In October the same year, 1955, my father died. He had been unwell for a number of years, suffering what is now called “war neurosis.” Two calamities in one year.

Experience of the highs and lows of life comes to us all. Hymn (*T i S 141*). “Praise to the holiest in the height and in the depths be praise,” sounds to me like an echo of the words that Job utters: “We bring nothing at birth; we take nothing with us at death. The Lord alone gives and takes. Praise the name of the Lord.”

The authors of the Epistle to Hebrews and Book of Job present us with stark pictures of human suffering and questioning of why that suffering happens. Both are concerned to challenge the assumption that God is like a great patriarch who dispenses prosperity and benefits or causes pain and suffering and whose dispensation is felt to be capricious. Life doesn't seem to be just, fair and even-handed.

Job's so-called comforters utter a whole series of platitudes that remind us of some of our own attempts to “comfort” people who are going through bereavement or hard times at work or play or in the family. Sometimes we feel as if we are confronting something illogical and irrational and don't know what is to be done. That something is Life. Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina* describes the collapse of the “upward spiral” belief system of Alexey when his wife, Anna, leaves him.

“Now he experienced a feeling akin to that of a man who, when calmly crossing a precipice by a bridge, should suddenly discover that the bridge is broken, and that there is a chasm below. That chasm is life itself, the bridge that artificial life in which Alexey...had lived.” “The chasm was life itself, the bridge that artificial life...” No one has said it more clearly. The defence, if successful, shields the individual from the knowledge of the chasm. “

“The broken bridge, the failed defence, exposes one to a truth and a dread that an individual in mid-life following decades of self-deception is ill-equipped to confront.” (Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*).

The picture of what reality looks like needs a sharp jolt. The way God operates in *Genesis 1* is different from that patriarchal figure who figures in the common imagination. The Genesis picture is of God as a worker in the abyss, one who struggles to bring order out of chaos.

Many creation stories in the Middle-East picture a mighty struggle with chaos. For the ancient Hebrews the major struggle was to bring the people to the promised land out of the waters. The waters of chaos were the gentile nations who had flooded the Middle East.

The gentile nations had from time to time deported the ancient Hebrews from their promised land and subjected them to exile far from the land. Like Job, the people had suffered loss after loss, of loved ones, home and fortune. They felt that God was putting them to extreme testing.

Maybe the Book of Job is partly a depiction of the journey of the people that became the new Israel after exile. The ancient Hebrews experienced much chaos as they journeyed to become a nation. Conquering armies, war and strife seemed to be everywhere and never-ending.

It is not, in many ways, all that different from the chaos, the wars and terrors that the modern human world is experiencing now, for we are living in chaotic times. The news, the papers, and films make us aware of the struggles to confront the chaos and try to bring some order out of chaos.

Life is a confronting business. If we think we are struggling alone, the biblical passages today tell us plainly that God also struggles alongside us to try to bring some sense and meaning out of chaos.

In Hebrews we read the description of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, begging God with “loud crying and tears to save him” from crucifixion...”God listened to his prayers”, but still Jesus “had to suffer before he could learn what it really means to obey God” (5:7,8)

When we reflect on the suffering of Job we see that eventually Job is confronted with a picture of God as one who has to be given credit for the marvellous work of creation which emerges out of a titanic struggle with daunting forces that are hard to handle or overcome.

The language that conveys that struggle refers to *Behemoth* and *Leviathan*. Footnotes will tell you that Behemoth is the hippopotamus and Leviathan is the crocodile. This naming of the forces takes us back to the Middle-eastern idea of creation emerging out of a struggle with the tortuous serpent which lives in a river or the sea. Primeval, powerful forces in nature.

Job is confronted with what it is like to be God in this world. “Can you handle Behemoth? I made him like I made you. Sometimes I don't know which beast causes me the most trouble, Behemoth or you. Can you pull out mighty Leviathan with a fish-hook? Will they jump to obey you?”

When confronting the chaotic confusing ambiguous and evil-doing creatures of the world, are we any less confusing, dark, chaotic and evil-doing? Of what other creature can it be said: “The thoughts of his heart are evil from the days of his youth” (*Genesis 8:21*)?

So God is throwing down the gauntlet to Job. If you think you can deal with this world, go ahead. Be my guest. You may find out that being just, fair and even-handed is a tougher call than you can imagine.

Things are more complex, more complicated than you think. You think you've got chaos, Job? Just look at the chaos I have to deal with. Human suffering is a part of the wider chaos. We have something in common: we are both trying to bring some sense out of the craziness, order out of the chaos. And, Job, like you, I will not give up the battle.

After this kind of epiphany Job begins to see, and says “I heard about you from others...now I have seen you with my own eyes” (42:5). He sees God as one who is busy struggling with chaos. Now this God addresses Job proudly and calls him “my servant Job” and tells the preachers of platitudes to shut up (42:7).

Job, struggler with chaos, is made in God's defiant image. God promises to defy chaos. The struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane is to embrace the challenge to take on the forces of Behemoth and Leviathan, the forces of chaos, which in Jesus' time are the Roman State and the religious establishment, or what we today call “the powers-that-be.”

Calamities are not the end. Life is laid down. Life must be taken up, too. Jesus said, “I have the power to give it up and the power to receive it back again, just as my Father commanded me to do” (*John 10:18*). A liberating word for all sufferers, the Jobs, the followers of the Lord. We are commanded to pick up our lives and become a blessing to others as we do so. Ones who joyfully sing: “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me his praise should sing?” (*T i S 134*).