

I want to turn our attentions now to the Book of Job that we heard read from when we heard our first Old Testament reading. It's a very unusual book, Job. It stands alone, so it's very long. It's 42 chapters. But there's no reference in any of those chapters to another character from the Bible. There's no reference to any story that's told elsewhere in the Bible. It's very self-contained. And it's not an easy book. It wrestles with some complex questions such as why do good people suffer? Yet, it's not a book that's often the topic of sermons. I've been preaching now for over 30 years. I've only ever preached one sermon on Job. Well, two now after today. But the clergy of St. James are up for a challenge. There are five readings from Job in the lectionary at this time of year, and we're going to take them all on. And I'm very pleased to say that we've also got an opportunity in our 9:00 education hour to reflect on the sermons and the readings, and we had a great start this morning. We had over 40 people in the room looking at Job. And we're not there next week, but it'll carry on in weeks to come, and I hope that we can wrestle together with this complex book and the big questions that it raises.

And in recent weeks when looking at Job and preparing for this series, it struck me that it's possible to read Job as a play and doing that has helped me to understand it. You could take the text of Job, you'd have to do quite a bit of editing, but you could do the editing, and it would work on the stage just as a play. And reading it as a play has helped me to see the themes and just to grasp what it's about.

When I was at school, we had an English literature class, and I'm not proud to say that I passed the course without ever reading the whole of a set text. I wasn't that familiar with any of the texts that we were studying, but I knew the Cliff notes which accompanied them absolutely back to front. I studied them assiduously. I was an expert on Cliff notes, and I passed the exam. And one of the things I really liked about the Cliff notes was that they would do helpful things, like name the characters, and then they'd give you little quotes that each character said that you could chuck into

any essay that you were writing on the set text and look very learned. So, I'm going to do something now that I've never, ever done before, which is to preach a sermon in the style of Cliff notes on this play of Job.

So, I'm going to begin, well, the whole sermon is just going to be going through the characters that are involved in this play. The first is the narrator. The narrator only appears right at the beginning of the book in the prologue and at the end in the epilogue. Isn't there in the middle. But the narrator does a very important thing, he establishes the drama in these opening two chapters of the book. And what we've heard read this morning, the passage that's printed in the bulletin, is like scene two, which is very similar to scene one that came before it. The narrator conjures up a scene in the heavenly courts in which a wager is made between two heavenly beings, God and a being, unhelpfully named in our translation, Satan. They make a wager on whether Job will turn against God even when he's afflicted with terrible suffering. That's the wager that's made. That's what provides the drama in the rest of the book.

And in scene one, the discussion led to Job losing his family and all his possessions, and it ends with Job saying, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return there. The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." And then the narrator adds, "In all of this, Job did not sin." And in scene two, which we heard read, the stakes are raised. The Satan figure says, "Okay, Job's still not cursed, God. He's still not sinned. What would happen if he suffered himself physically? I bet then he would curse." So, God takes the wager and the story continues to develop. The Satan figure is wagering, as he said in chapter one, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" In other words, the Satan figure is wagering that when Job suffers in his body, he'll realize that it's not worth believing in God and he'll curse God. So he's wagering that Job will only honor God in the good times when he thinks there's nothing in it for him. "Surely," the Satan figure says, "he'll turn against God."

So, by the end of scene two, the stage set for the drama, which works itself out over the next 40 chapters. And the literary device of the wager introduces key questions which are going to be addressed in the whole of the book, like why do good people suffer? What motivates our relationship with God? Is suffering a punishment? And remember, these questions are being addressed in the form of a drama, in poetic language. Job isn't a philosophical treatise, so we don't get answers to those questions in abstract, dry, philosophical terms. We get a poetic answer, which might be more of a struggle for us, which is why I'm glad we've got several weeks to wrestle with it.

The next character I'll mention is God, and God is the most problematic character in this play. The problem is that God initiates the wager which drives the drama. God admits to destroying Job for no reason. And that's the phrase that struck me when I read this text, for no reason. Isn't so much of suffering and evil for no reason. And after this scene, God disappears. He doesn't reappear till 40 chapters later at the end of the book where we hear the real voice of God speaking loudly and clearly. Although, I'll say now that God is not the focus of this book. It's not God's character that's being examined. It's Job who is the focus of this book, and it's all about his development of his character. So, we'll have more to say about God later, but for now, let me just say that it's only those like us who believe in a God who is good and loving, who struggle with the problem of suffering and evil. And our problem is how do we believe, hold the belief that God is good and also recognise the debts and the pain of suffering and evil in the world?

This is not something that an atheist would worry about. It's not a cause of concern for an atheist. Let me quote the eminent British biologist, Richard Dawkins, an ardent atheist who wrote this. "The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are

going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme reason for it, or any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there was at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference." There you have it, an atheist's answer to suffering. No problem there because you're not trying to hold that recognition of suffering with a belief in a God who is good.

And other religions and traditions reach a similar conclusion, maybe differently formed, to Dawkins. But I think if we're going to begin to make sense of suffering and evil, we need to learn the lesson of Job and begin by acknowledging that God is not like a divine puppet master. We need to let go of the idea that God does not suffer, God's not apart from the world. What we see in Jesus Christ is God coming alongside us in our suffering. God is involved in the suffering of the world. And we need to remember Job's place in the Bible. Job knows nothing of Jesus. This is happening way before Jesus came. But the story of Job is helping later generations to understand the nature of the God made known in Jesus Christ. Job is the man who shouldn't suffer, prefiguring the God who shouldn't be crucified.

And the next character I'll mention is unhelpfully labeled Satan with a capital S in our translation, which is not the same in most other translations, which are more accurate. What is being described here is closer to what we might call a devil's advocate, someone whose role in the Heavenly Council was to question assumptions. And in this role, it's his job to challenge the idea that Job would worship God when things were good and also when they're not so good. And the Satan figure is suggesting that it's only the prosperity of Job that makes him worship God.

And then there's Job's wife. This is the only line she has in the whole play, and it's challenging and difficult. She's the only person who talks to Job, not just about Job. And she says to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." There's lots we could say about Job's wife, but we'll move on to Job. And as I've said, he's not the

central character in the book, strangely. Sorry, he is the central character in the book. It's all about how his character emerges and develops. And one clear thing that's said about Job throughout the whole play we read at the end of our reading. "In all of this, Job did not sin." And that's a theme that runs throughout the whole play, because the narrator wants to make it very clear that suffering does not come as a result of punishment for something that we've done. Nobody deserves to suffer.

And you might think, "Well, that's a very primitive idea. Nobody believes that anymore." But think again. Every time somebody says, "Well, it's karma," or they talk about reincarnation, that's the view that they're expressing that you get what you deserve. There was an English soccer manager called Glenn Hoddle who was known. He was a terrific player and then he was a manager. And he was known as a spiritual man. And in the midst of an interview about a forthcoming International, the subject of disability came up. I don't know how it came up, but he was asked about why some people are disabled. And Hoddle expressed the view that people with disabilities were suffering as a result of something bad they'd done in a previous life. He said this. "What you sow, you have to reap. You have to look at things that happen and ask why. It comes around."

There it is. There's the theme. You get what you deserve. And there was an enormous outcry when he said that that led to him being sacked. But I had a certain sympathy with him because he was only expressing the dark side of what a lot of people believe to be true. He expressed how that works out. He took it to the limit, but he upset a lot of people and he was sacked. But that view that Hoddle expressed is wrong. It's wrong for us because we believe in grace. The central idea in our tradition is grace, that God reaches out to us in grace. He doesn't wait until we do a good thing or something worthy of his love and acceptance. He accepts us as we are, in grace. His favor towards us is unmerited. And those of us who live by grace can grasp the lesson of Job that just as grace is unmerited, so is suffering. In both cases, we don't get what we deserve.

So, these are all the characters that appear in the first two scenes of Job. And in fact, in the whole rest of the 42 chapters there's only three other characters left to introduce who we'll be hearing more about next week, the so-called friends, three friends of Job who torment him over a long period of time.

But what I think I hope we've done today is to sort of set the scene for the drama that's to be worked out and we'll be looking at in subsequent weeks as we stay with the Book of Job. And I'm glad we're giving him a few weeks to wrestle with and explore, because Job is a book that needs to be slowly unpacked if its wisdom is to be grasped, because it's complex. And that's why I'm glad we have the 9:00 education hour as a time to reflect on that. And I invite you to come and do that as, over these next few weeks, we ponder Job and the mystery of suffering. Amen.