

Third Sunday service, 17 October 2021

Talk: Knowing ourselves

Job 38: 1-7, 34-end and Mark 10: 35-45

I'm a bit odd – you may have noticed this before! But I really like the book of Job. It's such a bizarre book, a story we present to children while missing out 95% of it. And I love it especially because of the incredibly sarcastic God we hear from in today's reading.

We all know the story of Job, I'm sure. He's an extremely fortunate, rich and powerful man who is also pious. There's a debate about him in the courts of heaven, and the accuser essentially has a bet with God that, if the good fortune, riches and power are stripped away, Job will turn and curse God.

So Job loses his family, his wealth, his position in society, even his health. But he never curses God. And, in the end, because he's been faithful, he gets it all back again.

The thing is, that's only about two chapters out of the 42 in the whole book! Of the rest, 35 whole chapters are a long, tedious philosophical debate in which three of Job's friends essentially use a range of arguments to show that Job must have brought all this misfortune on himself – and Job defends himself against all their accusations.

That's a whole lot of depressing philosophy!

The key, though, comes when God actually enters the argument, which is where today's reading starts. God says, essentially, that the whole of the discussion has been one colossal waste of time and that, until Job and his friends can make it rain when they want, or create a goat, or give wisdom to animals, they should just shut up.

Basically, all of the philosophical argument in the book of Job is explicitly, *in the text of the book itself*, shown to be rubbish! That's 35 chapters of philosophy and advice that is completely pointless, except to give a huge punchline to God!

The point here, then, is that human wisdom is powerless against God. We can try to understand what God's plans are and where they're going to take us, but we'll never really succeed. Not even the cleverest of us. Not unless we listen to God instead of trying to work it out for ourselves.

So this is where we pick up the Gospel story for today. James and John, two of the twelve core disciples, who Jesus has been training for years, start planning for the future. At this point in Jesus's mission, He's got a clear image as the Messiah: the one who's going to bring God's Kingdom *on Earth*, who's going to overthrow the political powers and establish Israel as the true power. At least, that's what a lot of people are expecting.

But Mark 10 is where we see the narrative twist. Jesus is going to Jerusalem. This is the climax of his mission, the time when He's going to make it all happen. But he's also changing the story. He's tell His followers that it's not going to happen the way they expect. He says that, in political terms, things are not going to go well – He's going to be betrayed and killed, but that He will rise again.

James and John, though, aren't listening yet. In today's reading, they're still looking forward to that Kingdom they've been dreaming of, of a future glory with thrones and ruling and power. And they want to get themselves some of that glory and ruling and power! So they put their request in early, before the other disciples (at least, as they clearly see it!).

They ask Jesus to promise that they will sit alongside Him when He sits in glory, one on each side, flanking the throne, visibly chosen and elevated, literally with the ears of the King.

Again, though, Jesus twists the story around on them. "You don't know what you're asking," He says. "You're asking for suffering, not glory. Is that really what you want?" James and John, still not really listening, say "Yes."

And Jesus says: "OK, sure, you will share in my sufferings. But it's not up to me who gets to sit at my left and right hand."

Which is *not* what James and John wanted, of course! They're going to pay the price, but with no promise of the reward they wanted.

The key, for me, comes in what follows. The other disciples, understandably, are rather angry by what's just gone down. They know exactly what James and John were trying to do, how they were trying to put one over on the other disciples and grab the glory for themselves. But Jesus says, "Hang on. You've got it all wrong."

In the Kingdom that Jesus has come to found, the Kingdom He's spent three years teaching these disciples about, everything they understand about rank

and position and power is completely upended. Everything they think they know about hierarchy and ruling and serving is reversed.

In the Kingdom Jesus started, rank is impossible. If you want to be on top, or you think your abilities mean people should do what you say, or you've inherited some respect and authority, you literally have to do the opposite, if you want those things at all.

Those who want to be great in the Kingdom must become the servants of everyone else. Those who dream of power must clean toilets and scrub floors and dust ceilings. Those who think they're entitled to respect must put on their old clothes and dig the garden, rake the leaves, mend the fences.

And this is because Jesus, the one who is the centre of the Kingdom, Himself came to serve others and not Himself. His life is the example: no big house or network of powerful friends, but living day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, literally couch-surfing or sleeping in the open air, so that He can meet those in need and bring them healing and forgiveness and direction.

It is, or it should be according to Jesus, literally impossible to gain power or status in the Kingdom – and therefore in the church. Those who are driven to seek such things must deliberately and specifically avoid them.

But someone has to be in charge, we might think. Jesus's answer, though, is the same as the Lord's to Job: only God is in charge. Only God sits on the throne. Only God is the source of power.

When the disciples have to appoint a new member of the Twelve, after Judas dies, they exemplify this pattern. They do not ask for people to stand up if they want the role. There's not even a hint that they think that they themselves know who God might have in mind.

What they do is to ask the church as a whole to push people up. The body looks at itself and decides which members might be possible leaders. When there are two candidates, there's no debate over their relative merits and abilities: the Disciples accept that there's more than one option and hand the decision over to God.

Because, ultimately, it doesn't matter who fills the role, as long as they're all guided by God and submit to God's rule. We don't do any of this by our

own power anyway, and God can surely work through any of God's creatures.

I want to end by looking back at what this might tell us about last month's service, which Mandy called Commitment Sunday. Because there's a tension here. Jesus said, "Don't seek power and, if you desire it, resist the call and instead be a servant." But the Body of the church also says, "Stand up, put yourself forward, risk failure, but help."

It's easy to be afraid of being visible, of standing up for something. But it's absolutely vital that we do. What we need as a church isn't people who are looking for power and position, but we do need people who are willing to serve. This church, this part of Christ's Body in Trumpington, needs your strength, your wisdom, your help. Little as they might seem to you, Jesus calls us to serve.

Some roles are scarily public: perhaps being willing to say prayers in a service, or sing in a choir, or welcome people at a door. Some roles are scarily responsible: perhaps helping keep the building weather-tight, or ensuring that we can pay our office team, or guide the parish on the PCC.

And some of us may have to avoid certain roles, because we want them too much. But, for most of us, I think that what Jesus is saying is that we need to set aside our fears and the desire for control over our own life. Instead, we need to be willing to be a servant, even a little bit, to help the rest of this body, this church.

So, if you still have your card from a month ago, please take another look and pass it back to Mandy or Edmund. If you don't, check the website or ask for a new card – or just let them know what you think you could do, or what you need help with.

Because if we work together, if we set aside our need to assert control and power, if we listen to the God who gives wisdom to God's creatures, who made goats and ravens and mountains, perhaps we can build the Kingdom here.

Perhaps we can live in the Kingdom now, in this world, as well as in the everlasting future.

Amen