

## Job 23:1-17

<sup>1</sup>Then Job replied:

<sup>2</sup>‘Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

<sup>3</sup>If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!

<sup>4</sup>I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

<sup>5</sup>I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me.

<sup>6</sup>Would he vigorously oppose me with great power? No, he would not press charges against me.

<sup>7</sup>There the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered for ever from my judge.

<sup>8</sup>‘But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him.

<sup>9</sup>When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

<sup>10</sup>But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.

<sup>11</sup>My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside.

<sup>12</sup>I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.

<sup>13</sup>‘But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.

<sup>14</sup>He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store.

<sup>15</sup>That is why I am terrified before him; when I think of all this, I fear him.

<sup>16</sup>God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.

<sup>17</sup>Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.

I have been reading the Lord of the Rings to some of my children for quite some time, and last week I finished the whole thing. And I have to admit that I blubbed my way through the last five pages or so — not very dignified. And the reason was this: at the end of it all Frodo had achieved more than anyone. he had borne the terrible weight of the ring through the whole story, and suffered as its bearer. He had triumphed, but while the others end up happily ever after, Frodo doesn't. Returning to the Shire it is not understood what he has done; he is sick twice a year, because of his wounds. And after only two years it is his time to go the Grey Havens, to leave Middle Earth. It's not fair, and it makes me cry.

That's me being sentimental. In Job 23 we find Job making his complaint. He does not deserve his afflictions, and he wants to go the court of the Lord to present his case — he is confident that God will hear his case and side with him. The bottom line is this: it's not fair.

Psalm 22 is perhaps the most memorable of the complaint psalms. Jesus quotes it on the cross. David, who writes it, describes the sense of feeling persecuted and completely alone. Though it is enemies persecuting him, his first reaction is that it feels as if God has deserted him. He flips repeatedly between complaining to God, and then remembering that God is great in power and trusted by his ancestors, because he had led them out of slavery in Egypt.

What Job, Psalm 22, and the crucifixion have in common is the injustice of scapegoating. So while last week I used Job to talk about how a loving and just God could allow gross injustice to go on without his intervention, today I want to revisit Job's story, particularly thinking of Job as a scapegoat.

You will know, of course, what we mean by a scapegoat. A person who is universally blamed for the problem, when it may not in fact be their fault. An innocent victim. And you may understand that the term arises from the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement (yesterday!), when the high priest would lay his hands upon a goat in order to lay the sins of the whole of Israel on it — before driving it into the wilderness.

Job is a scapegoat, in his way. Though only he has been harmed, and not the friends and advisers around him, nonetheless his situation is damaging to their theory of the world, which states that God deals justly with a just universe, and so Job's misfortune must be because of his sin. They cannot stand for their theory to be taken apart, so they take the easy road. Job is wrong. Job is lying. Job must deserve his punishment, and as much as he denies it, they circle around him, condemning him again and again.

Psalm 22 presents just this scenario. David, before he was king, was chased and persecuted by King Saul, who was jealous of David's favour with God and with people. Saul has David hounded and persecuted, and David does not deserve this. In psalm 22 David lets it all out in graphically poetic and prophetic prayer. In his own persecution he foresees the persecution of the son of David, Jesus.

Jesus, again, is scapegoated. He is accused of being a revolutionary and a rebel, stirring trouble amongst the Jews and against the Romans. He is the enemy of everyone. And we know that of all victims of injustice and persecution, Jesus was the least deserving. We know that while most of us have done some wrong, Jesus did no wrong. Nonetheless, at his trial the crowds bayed for Barabbas to be freed instead of Jesus. There was perfect, wrong, consensus: Jesus must be crucified.

The particular injustice of scapegoating is that a true scapegoat remains undetected, and so the crime of persecution remains undetected. How so? Let's imagine a witch hunt. There is fear and paranoia in the community. There has been disease among the people and a poor harvest. That's not fair, it must be someone's fault! And the community casts its eye around and finds someone to blame. *This* person is strange and disliked. A few voices of suspicion escalate to many voices of accusation. We all believe because we all want to believe. The witch has no advocate and no defence. Whatever they say can be discounted — we can resort to any and all means necessary to hold our own account over the witch's defence. If a whole community is in agreement then we all believe it is right to have the witch executed, and it happens, and everyone is satisfied that justice has been done — when in fact the grossest injustice has occurred. But they don't know that!

Stories like this have probably happened thousands and thousands of times across the centuries. There is no way of knowing.

But — despite all that, and despite the hiddenness of the crime, a strange book of the Old Testament, Job, presents a story of scapegoating, and then has God take *his* side. Despite the level of persecution of David, nonetheless David eventually wins out over King Saul, and his laments find their way into Hebrew scripture. The victim has become vindicated. Despite the scapegoating and crucifixion of Jesus the gospel doesn't end there. God raises him from the dead, vindicating the perfect victim, demonstrating his forgiveness, but also highlighting the ease with which a community can condemn and scapegoat even the most truly innocent victim, and believe that justice has been done.

Last week we talked about Job and the problem of the grossly unfair. Now, in Job's story, in David, and in Jesus we see that God has worked to expose the hidden injustices of the world. Such injustice still goes on, but it becomes ever harder to accept and allow this sort of unfair. We know the story too well now. We are starting to become wary of too much consensus. We root for underdogs, we take the side of the victim. We are building habits of questioning more deeply into ourselves and our relationship with community. We know, with shame, that if you or I had been in the crowd that bayed for Barabbas to be freed in place of Jesus, or if we had been at the cross, we would have mocked with the crowd. And we don't like that. We want to be better than that. And so, by slow degrees, God is transforming our moral understanding, and our sense of justice. God has, in fact been battling against the unfair all along — battling for us to see fair, and to think more fairly.

SDG.

Amen.