

St Columba 4th October 2009

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Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Mark 10:2-16

As I sit to prepare this sermon I am aware of deep tiredness spread through my body and my brain - a sort of numb feeling. It has been an exhausting week for me. Many of you will know my niece Sarah has been hospital for the past two weeks in a critical condition. She died last Tuesday and her funeral was on Friday.

It is not this particular grief alone - and the busy week that I have had with keeping open home for family and friends who wanted to spend last moments with Sarah as she lay in the Vicarage, - it is also a sense of a more general grief that I am holding in my heart; a grief for the fragility of human life in the face of the complexities of living. One way and another we make living difficult for ourselves as human communities with all the expectations and sense of entitlement we build up for ourselves. Added to which is our fragility in the face of the power of the earth, and natural disasters, against which we have so little defence. The author of the book of Job seems to have known something of this defencelessness and when faced with afflictions and tragedy.

As I took my morning walk one day earlier this week, a small daisy attracted my attention and I bent to pick it. As I did so two lines of verse tumbled into my head. The one familiar to me from attending church with Pacific peoples, particularly youngsters at Wesley College: "God is good /all the time" and the repeated response: "All the time/ God is good". And the other: "God loves you" and then "let me count the ways." It seemed that the sun-yellow centre of the daisy pulled me deep into a sense of compassion, for all those struggling to face the death of loved ones this week. While the frill of tiny white petals challenged me to count the ways of love. Tears trickled down my face.

Before I had left home that morning I had heard the news of the earthquake and tsunami devastating Samoa and Tonga. Then later: the tornado heading toward Vietnam, and the second earthquake in Indonesia...many hundreds dead and missing. Whole villages destroyed, one Samoan clan lost 28 of its members - children washed away before parents eyes! Harrumph! How can any of this speak of a loving God...let me count the ways indeed. I am too tired to make any excuses for God this morning! Job must have some insight to help!

I simply do not accept that there is a God who is 'good' sometimes or 'not good' at other times depending on the side of the bed he got out of, so to speak. What sort of a God is it that saves some and not others no matter how earnestly they petition? Not my God and no god that I could have faith or confidence in would be so capricious. So what about love and the ways is it expressed?

In a strange way the uncomfortable reading from the Gospel points toward it. It is not the letter of the law binding people in marriage, nor the letter of the law applied to set them free from marriage responsibilities that expresses the presence of love or turns love off...rather love is to be in human to human relationship, such as expressed in the open receptivity and unconditional positive regard of little children. It is in the quality of our commitment and sense of connection to others that love is found.

After the funeral, we were gathered at my nephew's home. I was over-extended emotionally so went to sit quietly outside by myself. After a little bit one of my grandsons came to sit with me and asked about love.

I found myself talking with him human relationships and the importance of family, family relationships, and friendship networks that are simply there and do whatever it is that must be done in times of tragedy and hardship. Sometimes it is not easy to do what needs to be done...we are tired or have different needs pressing on our budgets or time. But love, such as the love that is an expression of God, is able to respond to the need of the other, even at cost to our selves.

We build up such expectations of what we deserve from life and what we want and aspire too, that our lives become very complex. We get very angry when and if things don't work out to fit our expectations or what we are told we deserve. Then we look around for who we can blame:

- The civil defence for not giving us enough warning
- The inadequate building code that fails to ensure our homes are earthquake proof
- The government failure to provide enough money for adequate healthcare
- God for not answering our prayers –or seeing what we wanted

But there is no-one to blame, and we do not deserve more or better than another because we are 'worth it' and they are not. And as Job was only too well aware, blaming God is not the answer either. We, like Job, have to work with what we have got and not waste our energy in futile anger or searching for a scapegoat. We are less damaged in our spirits and our bodies if we can let go the intense emotion of anger.

So how do we count the ways of love, of God?

As I said to my curious grandson...in times of tragedy and difficult times, be that self-inflicted, uncontrollable physical or mental illness, or natural disaster, love or 'God who is love', is found in the closing-in of friendship networks and family. Family and friends just do what must be done to surround the grieving and afflicted with practical and emotional support, encouragement and hope. This sense of knowing that you are not alone, and that others are focussed on your need and wellbeing, offers us an experience of being held in the healing love of God.

- And, love is also the experience of compassion or God-ness we know in our heart for those whom we do not know personally, but in whose place we are aware we could so easily be.
- Love is in the time and commitment focussing financial and skill resources in places of need...God does not save some of us and heal some of us because we deserve it more than others us.

But we are redeemed and healed through family, friends and the compassion of strangers not because we deserve it but because we are and we are.

Deep in each of us we know the frailty of being human and that is perhaps why we shape our God as a strong and saving God in order to protect us. Certainly our need for hope and comfort are expressed through the possibility of God love being directed at us. However I want to suggest that a more reliable and less capricious love is found amongst our fellow humans. When we reach out lovingly and unconditionally to another we are making the God whom we know as love present and available. However, unlike little children who openly receive love, we need to *remember* how to receive it. Then we are acting out the commandment to 'love one another as I have loved you'.

The reading from Job paints a picture of a world where life was tough and undeserved bad things happen. It happens today. This is not punishment, or of the character of God. Today we can declare that such things have nothing to do with God. Rather, God has to do with the moments of grace we experience every day, even in difficult times, and we need to learn to be open to these. In these gracious moments we find God, moment by moment, in smiles and cups of tea, a friendly hand on the arm in support and encouragement; in unexpected expressions of goodwill and compassion.