

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Fourth Sunday after Easter

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:

First Lesson: Job 19: 21ff-27a

Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me. Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh? Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever! For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.

Second Lesson: John 12:44

Jesus cried and said, He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me. And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me. I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness. And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak.

Text:

"I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

There is a tendency in human nature, when someone is suffering to look for a reason. In modern America, the tendency is to look for a reason in the behavior of the one who is suffering. We call it "blaming the victim".

Someone has a heart attack and we say that he overate and didn't exercise, or that he smoked, or that he worked too hard. A woman is raped and we ask what she was doing in that part of town at that hour or why she got into the car with a stranger.

When we ourselves experience misfortune we ask ourselves, "What did I do to deserve this?" The idea that sometimes bad things happen to innocent people is an idea we find hard to accept.

I think one reason we find the idea of undeserved suffering hard to accept is that we need to feel a sense of control over our own destiny. If life is logical and justice is somehow guaranteed, then we should be able to avoid suffering. But if life is chaotic and capricious, we have no sense of control, so we try to impose some kind of logic and order and end up blaming the victim.

Many centuries ago a man named Job ran into that way of thinking when some of his friends came to try and console him in his grief. I don't need to catalogue all the troubles that befell that poor man. His woes are legendary. Let's just say he had far more trouble and suffered far more pain than any man could be expected to bear.

Job's friends were convinced that the explanation for his suffering could be found within his own past. He had an impeccable reputation, but he must have done something terrible that no one knew about. Perhaps even Job himself was not aware of what he had done. So Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, his friends, kept urging Job to examine himself more closely to discover his sin and confess his guilt. But Job held fast to his protestations of innocence.

When he saw that his well-meaning friends were not going to be of any help to him, Job decided to make an appeal to prosperity. "Oh that my words were written. O that with an iron pen and lead they were graven in rock forever."

Parents often say something like that when they can't get through to their children. "When you get older you will understand that I am right. Remember what I said when you become a parent yourself." Did you ever say that to your children? We also appeal to prosperity.

Job is confident that he is right and his friends are wrong, but nobody will listen to him. He still believes, however, that justice will ultimately prevail and that someone at some time in the future will vindicate him. That is why he wants his testimony written in stone with an iron pen.

But vindication in the eyes of some future generation is not enough. Job needs vindication in the eyes of God. So he wants to have it out with God face to face.

But how can that happen? God is so inaccessible. He is Holy. He is transcendent. He is remote because he is infinite and therefore beyond the reach of the finite. This is Job's problem and the problem of all of us.

But Job is ultimately a man of faith, and he comes to believe that somehow there must be someone who will intercede for him and plead his case before God. So he says: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

This is a remarkable spiritual insight. Job has seen that human wisdom cannot solve his problem. Only someone whom he believes already exists, someone he calls "my redeemer" can ultimately connect human nature with God and correct what is wrong in the world.

This "redeemer" who is to intercede before God in behalf of Job must himself be divine. Can you see here the primitive roots of trinitarian theology?

We believe as Christians that God is actually three persons in one nature. The second person is the mediator between the first person and the human race. He exists from all eternity, but in the fulness of time he enters into human flesh and stands upon the earth in the person of Jesus the Jew. He takes human suffering into his own human body. He dies and is buried. Then he rises from the dead and return to the throne of God where he intercedes forever, not only for Job but for all mankind.

This is the gospel, the good news, the fulfillment of the yearnings of thoughtful men and women of every age who realize that our destiny really is beyond our control and that we are ultimately helpless before the powers of evil, whether those powers be in ourselves or in the world around us.

Jesus says, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The author of Hebrews says, " Christ has entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." Jesus again says, "No one comes to the Father but by me."

Job, of course, did not know all that. But he did recognize that the only way to God was by way of God himself. Alone in the universe, alienated from his friends, alienated from God, Job felt desperately that he needed a divine redeemer, and he believed that in time his redeemer would come.

And Job was right. His redeemer did indeed come and stand upon the earth. He lives today to intercede before the Father's throne for every one of us. He pleads our case, and whatever sins we may have committed, whether known or unknown to us, are being forgiven as I speak because of that pleading.

This gospel is the hope of all whom the world shuns and condemns because they suffer and are beaten down. This gospel is the hope of all who cry out for deliverance from evil in every form. This gospel is for those who look for a champion who will speak for them and fight for them and will ultimately give them the victory over death itself and all the powers of Hell.

Are you one fo those people? Are you able to see what Job saw, and to say what Job said? If you are, then say it in faith, because the gospel is for you. "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

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