

# Suffering and searching for meaning

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 14 October 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 21B

Job 23: 1-9, 16, 17; Mark 10:17-31; Song: *The Art of Letting Go* by Rachel Collis

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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Mental health day on Wednesday, mental health week all of last week, mental health month for October. Clearly, we are meant to be paying attention.

The Hebrew Bible lectionary readings from the book of Job, read through October, also intersect powerfully with the themes of mental health awareness. Job's innocent suffering, his search for meaning in the midst of undeserved anguish, evoke the struggle of people living with mental illness.

On ABC radio, which has been a terrific source of material on mental health, I heard the statistic that twenty percent of Australians will suffer from a mental illness in any year - one in five. And I know that mental illness, or challenges to mental health that are very real but which probably don't meet the threshold of mental illness, have touched, and continue to touch, the lives of many people in our community.

Last Sunday the beginning of the book of Job was read in our gathering, but not addressed explicitly in our reflection. Job is the Bible's exquisitely poetic reflection on the question of suffering, especially undeserved suffering. Its context was a conflict about Deuteronomistic theology which taught that obedience and faithfulness to God's instructions, keeping the covenant, would bring prosperity, health, and safety while disobedience would bring from God a curse. Such teaching is the antecedent of prosperity theology which undergirds churches such as Hillsong and Horizon Church, which the Prime Minister attends. At the heart of this theology is the belief that if you give your life to God, God will bless your life, your children, your family, your marriage, your work, your business.

The other, more damaging, aspect of this theology is the belief that, when bad things happen in a person's life, there must be a reason, specifically someone's guilt or a community's sin. These days, whenever there is a natural disaster you will inevitably hear some (forgive me) "idiot" religious person attributing its cause to tolerance of homosexuality. (Something like 10, 9, 8, 7, 6 ... how long will it take before you hear that!)

Job's friends who attempt to explain suffering to him follow the same pattern. They interpret the religious tradition to make sense of the mess that Job's life has become.

The human search for meaning in life, which inevitably includes suffering, is a very old story and a very old question. The first chapter of Job indicates an underlying theology that challenges the belief that suffering is God's punishment.

Job is sitting in the ash heap, separated from the community because he is unclean – is unable to be, to belong, to connect. He is surrounded by loss.

Yet he speaks almost philosophically of the mystery of life, which holds countless, undeserved blessings as well as immeasurable, indescribable loss. As he scrapes his diseased skin with a piece of broken pottery, he suggests that God is in charge of everything: that blessing and suffering are both part of life as it has been created, and that God is fundamentally just.

His theology is grounded in the belief that God, the Sacred source of life, will care enough to respond.

While our own theological paradigm might not be expressed in a belief that God intervenes directly to bring suffering or blessing, we can affirm the truth within Job's theology: that both suffering and blessing are intrinsic to the human condition and that both unearned joy and undeserved sorrow are inevitably part of life. To use a common cliché from our time, "*it is what it is.*"

An enormous amount of human effort goes into avoiding the larger questions of life – perhaps by the distractions of entertainment. But we also seek ways to find security and protection from suffering. We don't want to think about it, and we hope, deep down, that our self-help programs and our insurance policies might somehow protect us.

A corollary of this is the avoidance of the suffering of others or dealing with the questions that suffering prompts. If we look too closely at the suffering of others we will have to face the fragility and the vagaries of life. So, too often, we close our eyes, our ears and hearts, especially when suffering is so great that we cannot imagine a way through.

I believe we do that in relation to mental illness particularly.

While there are now helpful treatments that were not available in the past, when people with mental illness were locked away out of sight, the reality is that depression, anxiety, bi-polar affective disorder, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, are still not easily resolvable. They may impact the person suffering from them for their whole lives, and the impact on friends and family can also be severe.

As leprosy, or whatever skin disease it was that Job suffered from, rendered him excluded from community, we sometimes separate people with mental illness from our communities through stigma. We may be quick to judge, and to be frustrated when people experiencing mental illness do not just pull themselves together. Stigmatising is to some degree continuing to ascribe blame to suffering, and it helps us maintain the myth that such a thing could not happen to us.

But in truth there are no strategies or answers that will protect us from the things that life may bring.

Today's reading from Job is 22 chapters down the track from Chapter 1 – and in between that, there have been many speeches by Job's friends in which they have recited for him the conventional theological wisdom summed up the belief that life really is fair. If you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. And if good things happen to you, then you must have done something good.

It's a nice system, very neat and logical: there's payback for sin; there's reward for virtue. In Job's case, the punishment is so great, losing everything, all his children and then his health, that his companions assume that his offense must have been unusually terrible.

But, Job is not alone in disagreeing with his friends. There are people in our time who will not accept this rationalisation. If Job's friends had been good friends, they would have sat with him and listened to his pain. They would have been a compassionate presence, being with him in his suffering.

It is human to wonder about suffering – in the terminal illness of a child, the suffering of hunger and war; the plight of refugees and, in our context, especially of people who come seeking protection from violence and oppression who have been abused and abandoned to Nauru and Manus for political gain. It is part of human spirituality to ask: *where is God, the Divine Presence, in all this?*

And similarly we also wonder about the prospering of the shareholders of financial institutions whose wealth has been accumulated at the expense of retirees and vulnerable people have been left impoverished; and we can wonder about the ongoing success and re-election of politicians who are perpetrating crimes against humanity.

Spirituality, whether organised as a religious beliefs and practices or not, is in large part about making sense of the universe. And Job's story reminds us that there have always been diverse ways that humans have sought and constructed meaning and purpose in life, and that our understandings ebb and flow as we negotiate identity, awareness and connectedness.

Within the Bible itself there are different voices. Today we heard Job's cry: "*If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God*" (23:8). But within that is the echo of Psalm 139 – where the Psalmist addresses God: "*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?...If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast*" (verses 7, 9).

Two ancient voices expressing different moments in the human condition, times of loss and questioning, times of utter assurance of God's presence and love. All of us experience both in our lifetimes, and in this way 'faith' assumes a meaning that is much more than belief in particular doctrines.

Faith can become trust; trust that centres us in the mysterious One who is beyond all of our attempts to make sense of the universe.

Job's friends are like preachers who have no good news and no comforting presence, only harsh judgment and a kind of logic that violates Job's integrity. Even though Job says that he can't feel God's presence, that he can't find God so he can ask why these disasters have befallen him, he still holds to a stubborn kind of faith, a trust that God is just - even if life is not.

And so, in the text we heard this morning, he longs to find God, to stand before God and demand meaning, but in that present moment, scraping his sores and surrounded by his well-intentioned but misguided friends, Job still feels that God is far away.

Some people see the Bible as a book of answers; others see in it both answers and unanswered questions.

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann preached a sermon on Job, saying that Job was like Adam in his need for a conversation partner; a conversation partner who is adequate to the challenge, *“who will address him at the point of his anguish.”* Brueggemann says Job needs someone who is *“worthy of his life, elusive enough to interest, hidden enough to attract, severe enough to detain, awesome enough to encounter.”*<sup>1</sup>

Brueggemann’s observation led me to think about spirituality in our context; and indeed, about being part of a religious community of belief and practice. As Glen Powell said at the Futures Forum last week, when talking about mission in an urban context, approximately a quarter of the Australian population are people who are not involved in a religious community but who are open to spirituality.

I understand only too well why they are not involved in religious life. Just this week, we learned that the response of religious right faction within the government to the suppressed Religious Freedom report was apparently to codify into law further religious discrimination against LGBTI people, until they heard from voices outside their bubble that this is not acceptable to most Australians.

What is not available, though, for many people who are outside of a religious community, who are ‘spiritual but not religious’ is a community that has the search for, and construction of meaning, as its core business. A community where conversation can be found – with partners in conversation who will accompany us in our joy and in our suffering, and in our struggle for meaning.

I am not saying that such community cannot be found outside of church, mosque, temple or synagogue. I am not saying that being part of religious community will protect you from suffering or loneliness or meaninglessness. But I do believe that there are many people who would be strengthened and supported if they were able to find such a place to belong. A place to belong and people to accompany them through all that life may bring.

Last Sunday afternoon at the Futures Forum here at Pitt St, we dreamed our future, a future with a purpose. Within the sub-group of Church Council that has been developing our Mission Plan, our purpose, we have been experimenting with words that will express our Mission and Vision, our hope for ourselves and the wider community.

On the feedback sheet that people filled in, it had the words so far: *“The vision of Pitt Street Uniting Church is to further the Common Good by making our church a place of welcome and hospitality in the City of Sydney for spirituality, justice, ecology, arts, and community engagement.”*

In theological terms, *“our mission is to share God’s compassion, enable God’s justice, seek God’s peace, and embody God’s presence.”*

One of the comments that was noted down in the discussion after the presentations, was a question: *“can we be community without being missionary.”* community without being missionary. I would answer yes and no. Yes in the sense that we do not seek to have other people conform to our beliefs and practices. But I would also say that our future means being a missionary - if we mean by that intentionally inviting people into community.

Mission re-imagined is about radical hospitality, an openness, an opening of community, preparedness to be changed by inviting people who are outsiders to become insiders. It is about believing that everyone deserves companions for the journey and that such accompanying is at the heart of who God is, even in the times when our pain is so great that we cannot sense the Divine Presence with us.

In community, when we are being true to what we are called to be, we will be the place where we can claim in faith, even though we struggle in times of sorrow and suffering to believe it: that we are not alone; that we live in God's world; and that whatever we are called to be or do, God is with us.

God is with us in our bodies: in our hands blessing; our feet walking alongside; in our eyes looking with compassion.

In community, in telling these ancient stories, in the water of baptism, in the sharing of bread and wine, we remind one another that this is true.

And in this truth is life in all its fullness.

We are not alone!

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "A Bilingual Life" in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness*.