

**‘O that my words were written down!’ –  
A Homily for The Third Sunday before Advent**

*Job 19.23-27a*

Would, then, that my words were written.  
that they were inscribed in a book,  
with an iron pen and lead  
to be hewn in rock forever.  
But I know my redeemer lives,  
and in the end he will stand up on earth,  
and after they flay my skin,  
from my flesh I shall behold God.  
For I myself shall behold,  
my eyes will see – no stranger’s,  
my heart is harried within me.

This audacious and yearning poetry comes out of the book of Job, what Alter calls ‘the most mysterious book of the Hebrew Bible.’ As a sustained poetic debate it resembles no other work of Scripture, and though it is framed by what seems to be a simple folk-tale in which a trial of suffering is set for the righteous man Job in which he loses his wealth, his family and finally his health, it is in the poetic meat at the heart of the book that its real significance lies.

In this book the anthropocentric vision of creation – that the human person is the centre and crown of all things – is decisively blown out of the water, with the terrifying majesty of creation and the deep mystery of its tensions and paradoxes utterly overwhelming the tiny human perspectives of the protagonists. The core of the book really begins in chapter 3 with Job’s harrowing ‘death-wish poem,’ ‘annul the day that I was born / that day let it be darkness / Oh, let that night be barren, / let it have no song of joy,’

and culminates with God's direct response to this from out of the whirlwind, 'where were you,' he thunders 'when I founded earth? / Tell, if you know understanding.' This kind of courageous theology is probably just the kind of thing my Evangelical friends warned me about when I told them I was going to study theology. 'Oh, don't think too hard about things, or question them too much, you'll only think your way out of faith!' Job would have no time for such trite understandings of what faith is all about. Belief for this poet pushes us to the limits of our understanding and imagination and addresses itself to the thick conundrums and painful sufferings of our experience.

As the theological debate rages between Job and his three supposed friends, those who have come to tell him to stop pleading his innocence and accept the boring formulations of an easy wisdom, the intensity and beauty of the poetry begins to soar. There are three poetic levels used by the author and it is in the quality of the poetic language employed that the meaning of the book is to be found.

The first kind of poetry is that of the friends themselves, a rather bland and obvious proverbial understanding of life, that everything happens for a reason, and that we should blindly accept things the way they are and not think too hard about them or protest too loudly against them. The poetic language given to Job himself is at another level entirely. The intensity of his suffering and the stubborn passion that he feels is matched by the intensity and creative passion of the poetry given to him, as seen by the passage before us today, 'Would, then, that my words were written / that they were inscribed in a book, / with an iron pen and lead / to be hewn in rock forever.' The third, and decisive level of poetry is placed in the mouth of God himself as he speaks out of the whirlwind at the end of the book: 'Have the gates of death been laid bare to you, / and the gates of death's shadow have you seen?' 'Tell if you know it all.' The poet, 'having given Job such vividly powerful language for the articulation of his outrage and his anguish, now fashions still greater poetry for God.'

This weighty and difficult book of poetry and theodicy has so much to say to us today. It asks us to be relentlessly honest about the reality of suffering in our world, and to acknowledge the painful ambiguities and contradictions we face day by day. It gives us a

language of the suffering victim that cries out to God for something to change, and so tells us that prayer must be courageous and compassionate, a tempestuous cry of the heart, rather than a blandly pious statement of faith. It dislodges our sense that we are the centre of the world and that everything has to make sense on my terms and through my limited perspective. And it shows us the immense beauty and grandeur of creation itself, demanding that we find our place within it rather than using all our futile technologies to dominate and destroy it.

The fragility of our social and political worlds, our wanton destructiveness and prideful anthropocentrism, and our inability to seek for more than simple answers, have been decisively highlighted in our recent history. To forge a future together which is one of hope and faith and courage, rather than despair and cynicism, requires an utterly different kind of language and imagination and a way of standing together with those who are most at risk in suffering and solidarity.

It seems to me that the Book of Job can help us begin this journey together. Job's anguished but courageous words are words of lament, of struggle and demand, a yearning for justice and a refusal to accept anything less, and as Kathleen O'Connor reminds us, this kind of prayer is what we need today because 'laments argue, protest, whine and mewl; they berate God even as the one praying holds fast to God like a lover in a life-altering quarrel.' Such laments, 'compose a poetic forum in which to express fury at the deep fissures of the world and the ways God fails to care for it.'

In suffering our hearts are broken in order to make space for others, even as we find ourselves in the middle of the night, trapped in a fiery furnace. God meets us there and out of the whirlwind overwhelms us with his majesty and his beauty, his mercy and his love.