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Homily 12th Sunday Ordinary Time – Year B

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There is an idea anthropologists talk about called 'magical consciousness'. This is the belief that behind everything, there are forces at work, good and evil. When things go wrong, evil is at work: you are being bewitched, hexed, cursed. Or at very least, you have offended God, who is now punishing you. Conversely, if you do everything right, placate God or the gods, things will turn out okay.

The best result of such thinking is a mindset that generates a state of fear or, at best, fatalism. Neither of them, I will suggest, is a genuinely Christian response. To do this, I will go into the background of our first reading, link it to Mark's Gospel and suggest a new direction through St Paul's comments to the Corinthians.

The tragedy of the Book of Job is that we read so little of it in Church. Just bits that sound nice - like God's voice in the storm today, which is supposed to make us go "Ooh! Aaah!" at God's might a power.

But behind this lies a much more sinister, subversive story. Job's sufferings are caused by a bet between God and one of his advisers called the satan (who is not the Devil, but that's another story for another time). The satan believes Job is only holy because God gives him good things. "When things go wrong, he'll reject you", the satan says. So they hatch a plot to almost destroy Job's life. But Job does something different - he demands an answer from God. He rejects all the magical thinking reasoning that was common at the time - that suffering is a result of his sin (whether he knew he sinned or not) or even pretend to be sorry so that God will 'forgive' him. He just demands an answer.

God's answer - part of which we read today, but which goes on for a few chapters - is essentially like a storm: lots of noise, lots of force, but ultimately no real answer. Essentially God says, "I am God. You don't understand the way things are. So shut up!"

Which is all true. If we look at the whole cosmic history, it has a dynamic of its own, in which are part. Things have their own cause and effect. There is no magic involved, no acts of divine approval or punishment, in storms, floods, whirlwinds or dare I say it, pandemics. They happen.

But Job is equally right. In refusing to kowtow to certain 'rewards and punishments' ideas all too present in religions and cultures, he is acting with integrity. He wants real answers, not easy answers, even if they unsettle him. If what has happened to him is God's actions, he wants to know why. And when God refuses to answer - or declares by his own words that bad things just happen - Job chooses silence. He even says that he understands - many scholars suggest that this should be read not as repentance for some sin (maybe daring to question God) but a realisation that life is more complex than his theology. Indeed that God is not a big sugar daddy dishing out rewards for being good and punishment for being naughty.

The Book of Job is unsettling. It was probably written at a time when all the old assumptions the Jews had about God had come into question. The simple equation - say your prayers and

follow the Torah and all will be well - had failed the test of experience. The choice: reject God entirely or rethink our idea of God. They chose the latter.

I see Jesus something similar in Mark. In his ministry, Jesus skirts the border between orthodoxy - following the Law - and heresy: changing the way his followers saw God. Such a position is dangerous (look what happened to Jesus) and many, even the most devoted followers of Jesus, slipped back into the old ways of thinking.

Not Jesus.

He sleeps through the storm: for him, the storm is just a storm, with no magical sign of divine displeasure or even evil forces threatening him and the disciples on the boat. And when he finally says "Be quiet!" to the storm, is he not also telling his disciples to do the same? It is noticeable, too, that he rebukes them for lack of faith. This, I think, should be read as calling them to a different way of thinking - beyond a magical consciousness of reward and punishment. A storm is just a storm. And if you are scientifically minded, find out the reasons why storms happen.

Harsh as this may sound, I think we need to embrace this. The god who dishes out rewards and punishments is a false god, the god who must be placated at every moment is a false god. The God of Jesus, the God St Paul preaches too, is all grace. And all freedom. If we act in a manner like Jesus, we do so not out of fear or the need to win favours but out of freedom. We dare to think, to seek the truth, not satisfied with readymade 'answers' that pose still more questions. In this, in taking responsibility for ourselves and seeking the truth wherever we find it, we are a new creation.

This is not easy. Indeed, in many institutions - social, political, economic and religious - we are frequently confronted with 'answers' we are expected to embrace unthinkingly. If we ask too many questions, we are at best frowned upon, called disloyal, declared troublemakers. Quite often, I think, we outwardly conform simply because the strain of being an outsider is too emotionally taxing, too risky. We remain part of the old 'magical' order. We give up being a new creation.

But should we?

In seeking truth, in not being satisfied with the magical worldview or compromising his integrity, Job is a model of a free person. Jesus is a free person. Do we dare also to be free persons?