

Fr. Thomas Esposito, O.Cist.

October 3, 2014

First Friday Mass – Cistercian Abbey

Job 38:1, 12-21; 40:3-5; Lk 10:13-16

Job. The very name of this biblical man creates an uneasy silence. Even if we haven't read every anguished chapter of this book (*the* poetic masterpiece of the Hebrew language), we know that it shoves the problem of suffering into our path and does not permit us to pass until we have stopped and silenced ourselves sufficiently to ponder it. Tonight's first reading brings us to the last part of the drama in the book of Job. God has remained silent while Job insists that he has done nothing to deserve the calamities which have befallen him: the destruction of his home, death of his children, loss of his many sheep and cattle, corruption of his own flesh- all reported to him in harsh and immediate succession.

For 30 some chapters, Job's dialogue partners are friends who maintain that he must have committed some grave offense for which God is now smiting him. Job thoroughly demolishes their arguments for the doctrine of retribution, namely that the righteous are always rewarded and the wicked always punished in this life. Having testified to his innocence and rebuked the explanation for his sufferings suggested by his friends, Job demands a hearing from God, an opportunity to plead his case and receive an accounting of the Lord's apparently cruel ways: "Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus will He know my innocence!" (31:5); "This is my final plea; let the Almighty answer me!" (31:37). The drama of the book crescendos (with a strange interlude by a newcomer who rehashes the friends' arguments) to the peak at which we encounter it tonight: God finally addresses Job from the whirlwind.

A reasonable defense from God might acknowledge that Job has a point: if he hasn't sinned, his woes are not his fault. God might even encourage him to persevere in spite of his afflictions, and console him with a word of patience, assuring him that he can offer his suffering as an expiation, perhaps for someone else's sin (1:5!). We might also expect God to explain in detail why He allowed the adversary (in Hebrew, the *satan*) to inflict such awful trials on this just man, asserting that He simply wanted to prove the solidity of Job's faith for all to see.

What we hear instead can only be described as an apparently total non-answer to Job's complaint. One of my confreres refers to this baffling display of divine rebuffing as "the Great Stonewall." Job wants God to give a reason for why he must suffer so. If Job lobs questions before the Lord, God throws down not explanations, but exclamation points. The rhetorical strategy unleashed by the Lord is both brilliant and maddening: rather than answer questions posed by someone else, God offers questions of His own. "He seems to say," writes Chesterton, "that if it comes to asking questions, He can ask some question which will fling down and flatten out all conceivable human questioners."

We can imagine without much difficulty God's tone of voice as He machine-guns Job's argument without relent: "Did you make the sun? No? Didn't think so. What about the sea? The earth? The clouds? The stars? Any of that? You know how they move? Uh-uh." Job and his protests of innocence are utterly annihilated by God's cross-examination; Job can only retort weakly: "Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth" (40:4). He is reduced to silence.

Job's brief admission of his own puniness marks only the halfway point of God's magisterial smack down. The clinching facts for God's case, found in chapters 40-41, may be summarized as follows: "Job, you want justice? You want

to assert your right? Well, look- not only did I make the hippopotamus, I made the crocodile too! Boo-yah.”

Poor Job seems to have thought better of pressing his case after those counter-arguments, and concludes with a statement as beautiful as it is cryptic: “I know that you can do all things, / and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. / I have dealt with things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. / I had heard of you by word of mouth, / but now my eye has seen you. / Therefore I disown what I have said, / and repent in dust and ashes” (42:2-6).

This book troubles many, and rightly so. God certainly appears to be a cold tyrant, dismissing the laments of a righteous man without a hint of charity. The fact that God accepts Job’s prayer in the epilogue of the poem, restoring to him the various things he had lost, sits poorly with many people. Can the Lord be so arbitrary, like a Greek god in *The Iliad* toying with the fate of helpless men? What are we to make of this Israelite presentation of God and the existence of suffering?

A proper answer must begin with the whirlwind out of which God addresses Job, and finish with Job’s final statement. The manifestation of God in the midst of a storm is a theophany, the expression of God’s might in a tangible way, a power at once terrifying and alluring, like lightning or fire. Job recognizes that God reveals Himself and His transcendent logic by refusing to reveal His reasons with a logic which Job could follow. Job himself acknowledges that prior to the whirlwind, he had only heard of God from others; after this experience, in which he *sees* the Lord manifest in the storm, he is suddenly calmed. Chesterton once again is attuned to this most amazing fact: “Verbally speaking, the enigmas of God seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was comfortless before the speech of God and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of

God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.”

This effect is of capital importance for the meaning of the entire book (and our own spiritual lives): there can be no rational explanation for calamities and sufferings which befall a righteous person. Job will not find solace in the wordiness of friends who claim insight into the Lord’s ways; suffering has no logic which we can illumine by our own limited lights. What Job finds, however, in the One who *does* know the dwelling place of light and the course of the majestic sun, is the certainty that the darkened path he walks upon is enlightened by a lamp not his own.

We are all Jobs, dear friends, at various moments in our lives. We will experience the pain of loss, the confusion which only suffering can inflict, the rage against God one wishes to stifle but often lurks in the recesses of our heart. Yet we must remember at such times- when our own friends provide no comfort, when we feel as though Heaven itself is smiting us and God Himself has abandoned us- that our thoughts are not God’s thoughts, our ways not the Lord’s ways. We may find encouragement in the example of Job, who offers sacrifices for his own children at the start of the book when they sin (1:5) and prayers of intercession for his friends at the end.

But our thoughts, above all, must echo those of Paul who, like us, was blessed with the knowledge of a Redeemer who had already loved us enough to be wounded for us. Job heard of Him only from a distance (19:25), yet we find in his terrible sufferings the preview of our own- and their resolution: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? But thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Romans 7:24-25).