

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 4, 2018, Year B
Father Mike Holloran

“Is not man's life on earth a drudgery? He is a slave who longs for the shade. My days come to an end without hope. I shall not see happiness again.” (Job 7: 1-2)

Job sounds a little depressed. I'm not a medical doctor, but I gather that sometimes depression has physiological causes, something physical wrong putting our serotonin or dopamine out of balance, and medication is the only recourse. But sometimes depression is simply deep sadness over painful circumstances that surround us and seem to hem us in with no relief in sight. Medication might be helpful to get through a crisis but getting better requires addressing the underlying circumstances.

Job's depression was caused by painful circumstances. He says he will never know happiness again because he had known happiness, but within a matter of days his herdsman are murdered, his flocks stolen, his children all killed in a storm, and he himself stricken with a painful skin disease. From health, wealth, and happiness he is plunged into illness, poverty, and grief.

Friends come to console him. Not much can be done to change the painful circumstances, at least in the short term, so they focus on helping him cope with them. They reason according to the understanding of the time. God is just, strictly so, and it is in this world, this side of death, that God rewards the righteous according to their virtue and punishes the wicked according to their sins. So, Job must have done something to deserve what happened, and the only way to recovery is to admit it and repent.

As a coping strategy this doesn't work, because Job is innocent (that's the underlying premise of the whole story). Furthermore, his friends are wrong about God and His justice (which God makes clear to them at the end of the story). The friends are no help. Their efforts generate thirty-five chapters of high-flying speeches, but poor Job is left pretty much where he was, in anguish, wrestling with the terrible thought that God is arbitrary, capricious, and cruel. Can it really be so? No God at all would be less depressing, though depressing enough. I don't know how I could cope if I thought there was no God. When I take my troubles to the Lord and lay them out before Him, He opens a way for me. With the help of divine grace, I can cope with painful circumstances, and once I'm coping I can often start to change them. This requires faith, so what can be done for the atheist, or for someone like Job laboring under mistaken ideas about God? There is good evidence and convincing arguments that don't depend on religious faith but do prepare a person to encounter the living God.

In the interest of time I will give the condensed version.

It should be obvious that even if evolution explained the current look of the universe today it cannot explain the universe, because something must exist before it can evolve. So, what causes things to exist? Why is there something instead of just nothing?

Stephen Hawking, a reputed genius in the field of physics, wrote a book in which he argues that the universe contains within itself certain eternal principles such that the universe could have brought itself into existence. Okay. But does something that does not exist do anything, much less bring itself into existence? What Hawking thinks of as eternal principles is simply what believers call God.

So, there must be a cause of the universe which is itself uncaused. But is God just an eternal principle, an abstract mathematical necessity, or is God personal-- knowing what He's doing, knowing us, and caring about His creation? Well, the cause of a thing must be greater than the thing it causes. If x causes y, then x must contain within itself everything y is and more. Now there is in the universe personal knowing and caring (in us). Therefore, the cause of the universe must also be personal--everything we are and more. God must be personal; knowing, loving, good, just, and merciful to an infinite degree.

But, if God is good and just and merciful, why is there evil in His creation? This is the ancient question. This is what Job was struggling with. If God is good, why do bad things happen to good people? God allows room for evil in the universe to allow room for us and our free choices. Let me offer a homely illustration. If you were, say, sixteen years old and your dad was still running alongside your bike with training wheels on it, wouldn't you say "enough already! I can do it myself!"? Of course, you would. Then why would you demand that God run alongside your life to make sure nothing really bad happens to you? You would feel suffocated, and indeed stunted in your personal development, if your dad did it. For our own good, God doesn't do it.

Now we can draw a lesson from the gospel. Today's Gospel in fact. Jesus had spent the day in Capernaum preaching God's love to the despairing, healing the sick, and casting out demons. But he did not stay in that one place and give the people everything they might want. Early the next morning, before dawn, he slipped out of town. When Peter and the others tracked him down they said, "Everyone is looking for you!" His reply? "Well of course they are. But we must move on to the other towns. That is why I have come."

The lesson? God does not supply us with everything we might want in this world, but He does give us enough to assure us that He knows, and cares about what happens to us, and will eventually fulfill His good purpose in creating us. He is alongside us all the time, and sometimes reaches out to steady us. Then He lets go again and rejoices to see us pedaling

on ahead. The occasional spill is worth it.

There is an answer to Job's question. And it is not an abstract logical deduction but a very personal answer. It is Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Almighty Creator sharing our humanity and everything in it, healing and encouraging us, suffering dying and rising again-- Jesus Christ is God's complete answer to Job's anguished uncertainty.