

7th February 2021 Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Isaiah 40: 21 - 31

Psalms 147: 1 - 11, 20c

1 Corinthians 9: 16 - 23

Mark 1: 29 - 39



Look at the Stars

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many people to ask those perennial questions – *Why? Where is God in all this? Why does he allow such suffering and sorrow?* In the readings today from the prophet Isaiah and from the psalmist, they both address people asking the same questions and share some beautiful poetic images, including the challenge – *Look at the stars!*

The media have entertained a variety of personal observations of how people have dealt with the questions and the anxieties caused by the pandemic. One has occurred several times – *'I go out and watch the stars.'* The first lock-down was helped by warm summer weather but the present time has been more challenging – except for those few starry nights.

These old testament writers are speaking to God's people as they prepare to come home after years of exile in a foreign land. They were facing what we too will experience – things will be different. They would return to a homeland still in ruins following brutal warfare. Pictures of destroyed Syrian towns today surrounded by wasted, unproductive lands capture something of their experience. They are urged to trust in God's unceasing love. Their world may be in ruins but it's his world too. They are entreated to accept their humbling and to honour God by trusting him and living in hope for new things – *Look up – remember the majestic wonders of your God. Look at the stars. He created the world. He is eternal. His thoughts are far beyond ours. His future plans far exceed our best dreams.*

These scriptures have a lot in common with the story of Job. That account of one man's grievous suffering and loss is embedded with endless philosophical arguments, all trying to answer the *'Why?' questions.* If a film version were made of the story I imagine the climax of it would be accompanied by background music reaching an awesome crescendo in the midst of a violent storm. Then the music suddenly descends into quiet, simple notes as a prelude to a deep uncanny silence. After the endless questions and debates around *Why? Where is God? Does he have a purpose in all this?* it's God's time to speak with Job.....

'Job. Tell me, since you are so well informed. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Look at the stars! Four wonderfully poetic chapters later Job is on his knees – I was speaking of things I cannot understand. Before this I only knew you by hearsay, but now my God, I've seen you with my own eyes. You're real. Now, I trust you! You want only good to come out of all this!

The gospel reading today follows last week's incidents in the Capernaum synagogue. Jesus and his disciples went to Simon and Andrew's home for lunch. However, there is a delay. Simon's mother-in-law is unwell but she responds to Jesus' healing touch and soon she's waiting on them as usual. Many amazing teaching and healing works took place at the house after sunset and then, next morning Jesus is about early. His friends find him alone – probably in the hills - praying. They urge him to come down and continue the work of the last evening but he has more surprises for them, insisting there are so many other places where he must teach and heal.

I always feel the importance of this account by Mark is to point out how the 'quiet place' of prayer was central to Jesus' ministry. It is to all our everyday situations too. Getting through the pandemic and whatever future it may give us may well be helped by spending times alone at prayer, looking up at the stars and breathing the words – 'God of wonders – God of love!'



A Prayer [from Psalm 147]

*Lord, you are great and powerful;
Your wisdom is beyond our understanding;
You heal the broken heart;
You give new strength to broken bodies;
You restore broken lives.
In our darkest-night experiences
We look up to the stars,
Sharing our thoughts with you;
Trusting your knowledge of our present and our future.*

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