

Sunday Thought

3rd October 2021 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

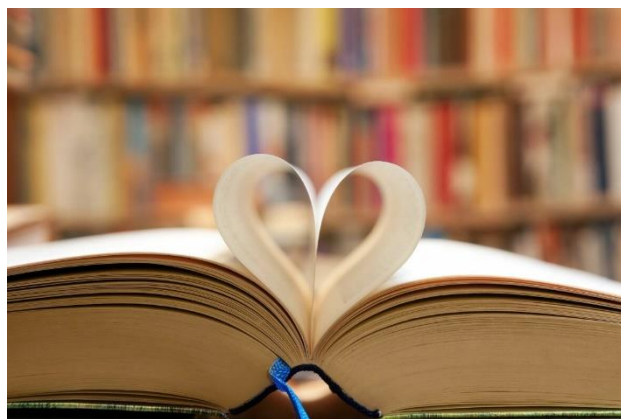
Job 1: 1 2: 1 - 1 - 10

Psalm 26

Hebrews 1: 1 - 4, 2: 5 - 12

Mark 10: 1 - 16

More than Rules



We are introduced to the book of Job today. It's the story of a good man who loses everything the world holds precious while suffering personal disease and bodily corruption. Job's story poses the question 'Why?' 'Why do people suffer even when they have lived a good life and been faithful in keeping God's rules?' It also asks 'Can anyone be so good as to escape suffering and personal loss?' With

that question in mind I read today's Psalm (26) which carries the title *The Prayer of a Good Man.*

The psalm presents us with a picture of a faithful and proud believer coming into the presence of God. He begins with a *catch-up session* in case the Lord has not noticed his good living. 'I do what is right;' he tells God, 'I trust you completely; I avoid wicked ways; I love this place of worship; I sing the hymns of thanks; I witness to all the wonderful things you do' 'So, Lord, I am sure you will be kind and forgiving towards me!' I thought about this 'good man' and could not see myself turning up for worship, sitting down and claiming a similar right to be close to God and receive his forgiveness and blessing. If I was suffering as Job was, I am sure someone would arrange for counselling, telling me 'surely you must have done some wrong - broken some commandment. Let me help you unravel your life so far and sort yourself out.' They would be right to suggest it. Job, however discovered that God is greater than the rules.

The Gospel reading reminds us how Jesus was often in conflict with Pharisees and religious lawmen about rules. Their religious life was bundled together with copious regulations about how to approach God and to lead a clean, holy life, worthy of him - even as to how you wash your hands after visiting the market - and that was long before a recognised virus pandemic! The Pharisees made many attempts to trap Jesus into a position where they could accuse him of breaking Gods' laws and hence disprove his claim to be God's Son - the Messiah.

On this occasion it was over the question of divorce. That was a subject for discussion and disagreement as common as it has been in our time. Many different interpretations of the divorce law were adjusted to suit the needs of the rich and powerful – and always in favour of the husband. It was open to debate because of a codicil to the law which Moses had given for extreme marital failures. Mark points out that this incident happened while Jesus was missioning on the other side of the Jordan. That could have been in the territory ruled by Herod Antipas where there was outrage about his divorce of his Arabian wife Phasaelis to allow him to marry his brother's ex-wife Herodias. Denouncing that divorce and remarriage cost John the Baptist his life. Now some Pharisee hoped Jesus would answer in a way which would issue in a similar outcome for him. However, Jesus takes them beyond the law to God's original intention for marriage – a man and a woman in one beautiful, indestructible union.

Returning to Psalm 26 the proud worshipper reminds me of a story Jesus told [Luke 18:9-14] about a Pharisee and a taxman who both arrived at the same time to pray in the Temple. The Pharisee copied the psalm by telling God what a wonderful religious life he practiced, while the humble taxman took the lowest place available to confess his unworthiness. The latter is the true approach to God, as Jesus explained. So, I see myself, not marching into church wearing a self-satisfied grin, but meekly, hand in hand with Jesus as he is described in our reading from Hebrews today. He is God's Son, the co-creator of universes, who by his Cross has proved God's saving love for all sinners and restored us to the family of God – worthy to worship in the house of God. I can stand, forgiven before God, only because Jesus stands with me!

Our real hope for this is in the other incident Mark records here, when Jesus' disciples discourage people from bringing children to him for his blessing – is that another rule about children knowing their place? Correcting the disciples, Jesus shows how, with the trust of a child, I can take his hand and by his worthiness enter the presence of God whose grace is greater than all the rules.

A Prayer (with Psalm 26 in mind)

Lord God, I come to worship you
not because I am worthy by myself,
but because Jesus died for me,
and by your Spirit, lives in me.
Hand in hand with him, like a trusting child,
I ask your help:
To do what is right,
To accept your guidance,
To avoid all wrong ways,
To learn to always give thanks for
everything,
and by my living, show your love to others.

