

Lectionary Readings: Job 13:13 – 14:6 or
Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 18: 1-14
Psalm 73: (1-20) 21-28
Hebrews 2: 5-18
Luke 10: 38-42

Last week we saw some of the ‘structure’ in the Book of Job. After misfortune falls on him and he is in despair, his three friends come to offer words of conciliation.

An outline of the book shows three ‘cycles’ of speeches. The reading today, from Job 13/14, comes at the end of the first cycle. Last week Eliphaz was giving his response to Job’s opening lament. Job replies to Eliphaz (chapters 6&7), then Bildad speaks (chapter 8) with another reply from Job (chapters 9&10). Finally Zophar makes his first speech (chapter 11) to which Job again replies (chapters 12-14) – the speech that includes the reading today.

The NIV Study Bible, in a footnote, comments:

Zophar’s failure to put himself in Job’s place before condemning him shows a lack of compassion. Nor is Zophar entirely correct in his condemnation: Job has sincerely challenged what he perceives to be God’s unjust actions (see 9: 14-24), but he has not mocked God (as Zophar accuses him of having done).

Job makes his reply. As in previous responses, it is divided into two parts: he speaks to his three friends (12:2-13:19), then to God (13:20-14:22). The first seven verses of our reading are the end of his addressing the friends; in the remainder he speaks to God.

We note, at the beginning of Job’s reply to Zophar an element of ‘sarcasm’:

¹Then Job replied:

² **Doubtless you are the only people who matter, and wisdom will die with you!**

³ But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know all these things?

And again in 12:12:

¹² Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?

As the NIV Study Bible note on this verse says:

Job sarcastically chides his counsellors for being elders and yet lacking in true wisdom.

Job is still adamant that there is no reason from the way he lives his life why he should be suffering but his hope remains placed in God, as he says to his friends:

¹³ ‘Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may.

¹⁴ Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands?

¹⁵ Though **he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely^[a] defend my ways to his face.**

[a] alternative translation – He will surely slay me; I have no hope – yet I will defend my ways to his face.

¹⁶ Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance, for no godless person would dare come before him!

¹⁷ Listen carefully to what I say; let my words ring in your ears.

¹⁸ **Now that I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated.**

¹⁹ **Can anyone bring charges against me? If so, I will be silent and die.**

When Job speaks to God he has two initial requests – (1) that God will remove the ‘punishment’ he is suffering and (2) that God will speak to him. If God speaks to him, Job will reply, or, he says *“let me speak, and you reply to me”*.

The counsellors have been saying that Job must have sinned for God to punish him in this way – has their argument had some effect for Job asks the Lord *“How many wrongs and sins have I committed? Show me my offence and my sin”*.

Once again Job ‘complains’ how he has been treated

²⁴ Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?

²⁵ Will you torment a wind-blown leaf? Will you chase after dry chaff?

²⁶ For you write down bitter things against me and make me reap the sins of my youth.

Job is certain his present life is blameless – it must therefore be something he did when younger.

Verse 27 makes reference to a Babylonian practice:

²⁷ You fasten my feet in shackles; you keep close watch on all my paths by **putting marks on the soles of my feet.**

The Babylonian code of Hammurapi (18th century B.C.) records the practice of putting such marks on slaves.

As we move into the first six verses of chapter 14 there are some familiar words:

¹ **Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble.**

² **They spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure.**

³ Do you fix your eye on them? Will you bring them before you for judgment?

⁴ Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!

⁵ A person's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.

⁶ So look away from him and let him alone, till he has put in his time like a hired labourer.

In the 'Service for the burial of the dead' found in the 'Book of Common Prayer' we reach the point where the body has arrived at the graveside. As it is prepared for lowering into the ground the "*Priest shall say*":

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.

The NIV Study Bible again comments on verses 2-6:

A symmetrical poem centred around v.4; v.2 corresponds to v.5, and v.3 to v.6. Job disagrees strongly with God: given man's insignificance and inherited impurity, why does God take him so seriously (see 13:25)?

²⁵ *Will you torment a wind-blown leaf? Will you chase after dry chaff?*

The Oxford Bible Commentary on the Apocrypha describes Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 16:24-18:14 as a passage emphasising **Wisdom and Creation**. Our reading comes right at the end of this section: (New English Bible)

¹ He who lives for ever is the Creator of the whole universe;

² right belongs to the Lord alone *and there is none beside him*

³ *who can steer the world with his little finger, so that all things obey his will; as king of the universe, he has power to fix the bounds between what is holy and what is profane.*

⁴ To no man is it given to unfold the story of his works; who can trace his marvels to their source?

⁵ No man can measure his majestic power, still less, tell the tale of all his mercies.

⁶ Man can neither increase nor diminish them, nor fathom the wonders of the Lord.

⁷ When a man comes to the end of them he is still at the beginning, and when he has finished he will still be perplexed.

⁸ What is man and what use is he? What do his good or evil deeds signify?

⁹ His span of life is at the most a hundred years; ¹⁰ compared with endless time, his few years are like one drop of sea-water or a single grain of sand.

¹¹ This is why the Lord is patient with them, lavishing his mercy upon them.

¹² He sees and knows the harsh fate in store for them, and therefore gives full play to his forgiveness.

¹³ Man's compassion is only for his neighbour, but the Lord's compassion is for every living thing.

He corrects and trains and teaches and brings them back as a shepherd his flock.

¹⁴ He has compassion on those who accept discipline and are eager to obey his decrees.

The Commentary again:

The concluding verses of chapter 17 and 18: 1-14 (*our reading*) constitute a hymn praising the mercy of God. Sirach emphasises **the surpassing power of God and the insignificance of humanity** (*a similar theme to that encountered in Job*). Chapter 18 verse 8 echoes Psalm 8:5:

⁵ You have made them/*him* a little lower than the angels/*God* and crowned them/*him* with glory and honour.

Compare this with Psalm 144:3:

³ LORD, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them?

Sirach will not conclude that human beings have been with glory and honour, only that God has mercy on them.

The estimate of life expectancy is slightly higher than in Psalm 90:10 (*seventy or eighty years*), but the difference is inconsequential. (In contrast, Isaiah 65:20 promises that in the new creation death before the age of 100 years will be premature.) Just as Sirach regards the imminence of death as a reason that people should be moral, he also regards it as a reason for divine mercy. Chapter 18 verse 13, which extends the divine compassion to every living thing, is in sharp contrast to chapter 12 verse 6, where God has no pity on the wicked ("*The Most High himself hates sinners and sends bad men what they deserve*"), but is in accordance with Hosea 11:8-9:

⁸ How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?

How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim?

My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.

⁹ I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again.

For I am God, and not a man - the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities.

And with the Wisdom of Solomon 11:23: (NRSV)

²³ But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent

Sirach 18:14, however, seems to restrict God's compassion to those who submit to his law. The latter notion is more typical of Sirach, and is likely to reflect his own view over against a more generous tradition.

This theme is carried forward into the Psalm for this Second Service – Psalm 73, the first in Book III of the Psalter. The attribution given is - a **psalm of Asaph**. The NIV Study Bible comments on "the sharply-etched contrast of v.1 and v.27" of the psalm:

¹ Surely God is **good to Israel**, to those who are pure in heart.

²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; **you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.**

An internet search, produced a Wikipedia entry (can we rely on it?) about the psalms of Asaph:

The Psalms of Asaph are **the twelve psalms numbered as 50 and 73–83 in the Masoretic Text, and as 49 and 72–82 in the Septuagint.**

Scholars have determined that a psalm's attribution to Asaph can mean a variety of things. It could mean that the psalms were a part of a collection from the Asaphites, a name commonly used to identify temple singers. Another possibility is that the psalms were performed in the style or tradition of the guild bearing Asaph's name. Asaph is said to either be the author or the transcriber of these psalms. He may not have said these psalms but transcribed the words of David. No specific time period is known to be associated with these Psalms, but the record of destruction noted in Psalm 74 may indicate that these Psalms came from the post-exilic period.

Matthew Henry introduces his commentary on Psalm 73 in this way:

This psalm, and the ten that next follow it, carry the name of Asaph in the titles of them. If he was the penman of them (as many think), we rightly call them psalms of Asaph. If he was only the chief musician, to whom they were delivered, our marginal reading is right, which calls them psalms for Asaph.

It is probable that he penned them; for we read of the words of David and of Asaph the seer, which were used in praising God in Hezekiah's time (2 Chronicles 29:30).

Though the Spirit of prophecy by sacred songs descended chiefly on David, who is therefore styled "the sweet psalmist of Israel", yet God put some of that Spirit upon those about him.

This is a psalm of great use; it gives us an account of the conflict which the psalmist had with a strong temptation to envy the prosperity of wicked people. He begins his account with a sacred principle, which he held fast, and by the help of which he kept his ground and carried his point (v.1).

He then tells us, (I) how he got into the temptation (vv.2-14), (II) How he got out of the temptation and gained a victory over it (vv.15-20), (III) How he got by the temptation and was the better for it (vv.21-23). If, in singing this psalm, we fortify ourselves against the life temptation, we do not use it in vain. The experiences of others should be our instructions.

The NIV Bible Commentary gives the title "**The Suffering of God's Children and the Goodness of God**" to the psalm. In its introduction we read:

The psalmist struggles within himself as to the appropriate response to evil and injustice in the world. This psalm is best categorized as a *wisdom psalm* in which lament is the vehicle of communication.

Seven sections are identified.

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| I. Experience and Belief | (vv.1-3) |
| II. Prosperity of the Wicked | (vv.4-12) |
| III. Personal Reaction | (vv. 13-17) |
| IV. Affirmation of God's Justice | (vv.18-20) |
| V. Evaluation of the Psalmist's Reaction | (vv.21-22) |
| VI. The Desire of the Godly | (vv.23-26) |
| VII. Experience and Hope | (vv.27-28) |

Who wrote Hebrews? For a long period of time it was described as "Paul's Letter to the Hebrews" but modern scholars consider it highly unlikely that the letter was penned by the Apostle. Three immediate reasons present themselves – the writing style is a complete contrast to that of Paul and, secondly, the author does not identify 'himself' - Paul regularly gave his identity and made his letters very personal. The third reason is found in Hebrews 2:3b:

¹We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

²For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.

The last verse seems to indicate that the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul on the Damascus road.

The letter is written to Jewish converts by a Christian Jew of standing within the Early Church. As we will see the book is full of Old Testament references – the author is clearly an authority in this area.

The earliest candidate (about 200 AD) for authorship is Barnabas, a Jew from the priestly tribe of Levi. He became a close friend and fellow worker with Paul – the two of them were commissioned by the church in Antioch for the work of evangelism, which led to Paul's first missionary journey.

Another leading candidate, first suggested by Martin Luther, is Apollos – a Jewish Christian, born in Alexandria. There is a description of him, given by Luke, in Acts 18:24:

²⁴Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. **He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.**

²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.

²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

²⁷When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

²⁸For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

It is not clear, from Biblical texts, if Paul and Apollos ever met and worked together as had Paul and Barnabas. We do know, however, that both were involved in the establishment and growth of the Christian church in Corinth: (1 Corinthians 3)

³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?

⁴For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere human beings?

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

⁶**I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.**

⁷**So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.**

Either of Barnabas or Apollos could have written this letter to the Hebrews.

There have been times in the past when I have been very envious of Christian friends who have been able to give chapter and verse along with the actual Biblical text. The best I can usually manage is to say "somewhere in Scripture". I should feel encouraged by our passage from Hebrews!:

⁶**But there is a place where someone has testified:**

'What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him?

⁷You made them a little^[a] lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour and put everything under their feet.'^{[b][c]}

Footnotes

a. [Hebrews 2:7](#) Or *them for a little while*

b. [Hebrews 2:8](#) [Psalm 8:4-6](#)

c. [Hebrews 2:8](#) Or ⁷*You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honour/ ⁸and put everything under his feet.'*

The passage being quoted by the author of Hebrews, as shown in the footnote, comes from Psalm 8:

⁴what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?^[a]

⁵You have made them^[b] a little lower than the angels^[c] and crowned them^[d] with glory and honour.

⁶You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their^[e] feet:

Footnotes

a. [Psalm 8:4](#) Or *what is a human being that you are mindful of him, / a son of man that you care for him?*

b. [Psalm 8:5](#) Or *him*

c. [Psalm 8:5](#) Or *than God*

d. [Psalm 8:5](#) Or *him*

e. [Psalm 8:6](#) Or *made him ruler . . . ; / . . . his*

The writer is emphasising Jesus dying for us all and his suffering as a human being – making a 'family link' between us and Jesus. He quotes Scripture again:

¹¹Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.^[a] ¹²He says,

'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.' **(Psalm 22:22)**

¹³And again,

'I will put my trust in him.' **(Isaiah 8:17)**

And again he says,

'Here am I, and the children God has given me.' **(Isaiah 8:18)**

Footnotes

a. [Hebrews 2:11](#) The Greek word for *brothers and sisters (adelphoi)* refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family; also in verse 12; and in 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22.

Remembering the importance of the High Priest and the Day of Atonement to an orthodox Jew we can see the Jewish heritage emphasised in verses 16-17:

¹⁶For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹

⁷For this reason he had to be made like them,^[a] **fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.**

Footnotes

a. [Hebrews 2:17](#) Or *like his brothers*

The Christian element overlays this as shown by verse 18:

¹⁸Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Our Gospel reading from Luke focuses on a very practical, and well known, incident in the life and ministry of Jesus. He has come to the home of Martha; the presence of Mary seems to be almost an afterthought!

Mary and Martha only appear in two of the four Gospels – in Luke and in John (where we also encounter their brother Lazarus).

It is only in Luke that we have this account of Martha's 'complaint' to Jesus that she is being left to do all the preparation while sister Mary just sits and listens to what Jesus is saying.

The answer is very clear – *“You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one.*

(some manuscripts have alternative wording - but only one thing is needed)

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

What does this passage say to us about the place of 'service' and of 'reflection'? Jesus is not condemning Martha for her worry, her becoming upset about many things, but he is saying that spending time with Him is more important – indeed is the most important thing we can do in our lives.

Perhaps, after that time of attuning with Him, we will be called or led to serve. We have, as Christians, inherited a great deal from the Old Testament prophets.

We are reminded again of the words of Amos concerning insincere worship and what is demanded 'socially': (Amos 5: 21-24)

²¹ I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me.

²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

²⁴ **But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!**

Also the words of Micah: (Micah 6)

²⁴ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly^{al} with your God.

Footnotes

a. Micah 6:8 Or *prudently*

As a church, as a body of Christians, it is important that we have our cares and worries for the world – that we are a Serving Church – but this can only be truly effective when we are at one with the Father and the Son.

Behold the servant of the Lord!
I wait thy guiding eye to feel,
To hear and keep thy every word,
To prove and do thy perfect will,
Joyful from my own works to cease,
Glad to fulfil all righteousness.

Me if thy grace vouchsafe to use,
Meanest of all thy creatures, me,
The deed, the time, the manner choose;
Let all my fruit be found of thee;
Let all my works in thee be wrought,
By thee to full perfection brought.

My every weak though good design
O'errule or change, as seems thee meet;
Jesus, let all my work be thine!
Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,
And pleasing in thy Father's sight;
Thou only hast done all things right.

Here then to thee thine own I leave;
Mould as thou wilt the passive clay;
But let me all thy stamp receive,
But let me all thy words obey,
Serve with a single heart and eye,
And to thy glory live and die.

Charles Wesley