

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

The Book of Job is not an easy read, but the passage we hear today is a very credible description of someone whose life seems totally without meaning. Most people avoid thinking too deeply about what life is for: they fill their days with business, with activity, with the pursuit of material goals such as happiness, comfort, pleasure, wealth, success, and for much of the time these things absorb all of their attention and energy. But, however hard we try to isolate ourselves from the deeper questions of life, from time to time we all find ourselves asking the question: what is the point of it all? It is one of the great temptations of human life to suppress this question, to distract ourselves from it with another drink, a new car, a holiday - maybe even a new relationship, a new job, whatever. But the question will not go away, and will keep resurfacing. Sometimes it will be some crisis that forces us to face it, like bereavement, or sickness, or unemployment; at other times it may be that we just run out of energy to keep avoiding it, and we feel overwhelmed with a sense of meaninglessness. I wonder how many people each day could identify with the voice of Job, to whom everything seems utterly pointless:

"Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?'

Risen I think 'How slowly evening comes!'" .

Job, perhaps, has better reason than most to be in the grip of this sense that nothing matters. Until recently he had known prosperity and happiness: he was healthy, wealthy, and the head of a large family. Now all that has gone, and he has nothing left. Job finds himself cut off from his past - nothing remains of the life he used to live, and he is also cut off from the future because he can see nothing but emptiness and death. It is exactly this sense of being cut off from the past and from the future that brings on a sense of alienation, even despair. In our own day this can seem especially strong and powerful - we feel that the world is changing rapidly, and in a way that we cannot control, a way that means we cannot be sure that all the things we have known and valued in the past will survive. The prosperity that we thought we had seems to be melting away, and we do not know if it will return. We sense that the balance of power in the world is shifting away from countries such as our own, and

we are not sure where this will lead us. On our own, we feel powerless to do much about it. We do not know what the future may hold. Our experience of life seems cut off from the past, because we cannot recreate the world that we thought would last for ever, and the future that we thought would be sure and certain has turned out to be very unpredictable. I've put a review of a novel called Revolutionary Road on the newsletter, and that novel portrays this to perfection. It is a tragic story of a doomed marriage, the common life of a couple who find themselves more and more unhappy, more and more consumed by a sense that nothing has any meaning. They find that the friends they used to enjoy being with now bore them, and the happy social evenings now become excruciatingly and embarrassingly dull and silent. They find that the lives they are living do not feel like their lives any more. They are alienated from their past, and from their dreams for the future. As they ask the questions that Job asked, they find they have no answer, there is nothing to draw on. It is the story of a generation that felt cut off from the lives of their parents by rapid change, and unable to see the way ahead. There is a danger that something similar may happen in our own day, and many people simply do not have the tools to overcome it. So what is to be done?

There is an answer to this overwhelming sense of meaninglessness, and we can pick it up from the story of the life of Jesus. In today's gospel we read about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus heals her, and immediately she begins to wait on Jesus and his friends. She is healed, set free from the power of sickness, but this is more than just a release from illness. She is healed for service. It is no coincidence that she begins to wait on the Lord and his friends, it is actually a part of her healing. Because if there is one thing that is clear from the life of Jesus, it is that life finds its fullest sense of meaning in what we do to enrich and enhance the lives of other people. In today's gospel, long after sunset Jesus is healing the sick - not just a few of them, but dozens because we read that the whole town came to him. Then he is up again early the next day to pray, but when he finds that the people are looking for him he realises there is danger here: the people in this town have become obsessed with his miraculous healings, and much as he wants to set people free from illness, what he really wants to do is to help them change the way they live their lives. Healing is important, but teaching is more important still, so although he has had a short night

with little sleep, he moves off to teach elsewhere. Later in the gospel, seeing that the people are lost like sheep without a shepherd, once again he sets out to teach them, although he and his friends are exhausted. So the stories go on, until his last night with his friends, when he wants to act out for them the heart of his message, which he does by kneeling on the ground in front of them and washing their feet. As the shadow of death hangs over him, the image that he wants to imprint on their minds, the image that encapsulates his whole life, is of him washing their feet: Jesus the servant of all.

So the answer to Job's sense of meaninglessness, and that of our own generation, lies in accepting the paradoxical truth that it is not what I do for myself that is rewarding, but what I do for other people; it is not what I do with the intention of making my life better that matters, but what I do to make other people's lives better. St. Paul sums the message up in his own way: 'I made myself all things to all men'. That is to say, seeing the particular needs, weaknesses and hurts of every person, he made himself the instrument of their healing. It is in these precious insights that we find the cure to the sense of meaninglessness that afflicted Job, and afflicts many still today.