Comment:
Marginalizing the Book of Job

Anyone interested in the Bible as literature regards the Book of Job as one of the greatest compositions in the whole book; yet, for the average Mass-going Catholic, it might as well not exist.

Every other year, according to the Lectionary, weekday Mass-goers would hear quite substantial passages during the Twenty Sixth Week of the Year (next due towards the end of September 2004). Sunday Mass-goers, on the other hand, have only two opportunities to hear from the Book of Job, in Year B of the three year Sunday cycle: on the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (9 February last) and on the Twelfth Sunday (22 June next: taken over, this year, in Scotland anyway, by the Feast of Corpus Christi). That is *all.*

Sunday first readings are selected to focus on the gospel. On 9 February St Mark's account of the healing of Simon Peter's mother in law and of others (Mark 1: 29-39) was preceded by Job's complaint against God (Job 7: 1-4 and 6-7, RSV): 'Has not man a hard service upon earth, and are not his days like the days of a hireling? Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like a hireling who looks for his wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope. Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good'.

Human life is drudgery, a sleepless night, and passes as fast as a weaver's shuttle: a kaleidoscope of graphic, albeit totally contradictory images.

The Lectionary skips verse 5: 'My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out again'. It is an interesting exercise to go through the Lectionary looking for such omissions. Passages are sometimes shortened, presumably because Catholics are supposed to dislike long Old Testament readings. Sometimes, one guesses, a verse seemed, to the selectors, too indelicate, as perhaps here — though Job is, after all, seated among the ashes, scraping himself with a potsherd, 'afflicted with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head' (Job 2:7-8). It is odd to leave this out.

Perhaps the selectors thought Catholics know the story of Job well enough: the 'patience of Job'; Blake's illustrations, reproductions of

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Georges de la Tour's picture 'Job visited by his wife' — the picture featured in Muriel Spark's novel *The Only Problem* (1984).

The 'problem', of course, is why innocent people have to suffer. Job's friends, his 'comforters', insist that there is a meaning in his suffering and that they know what it is: if you suffer it is because you deserve to do so.

Job absolutely rejects this primitive — and still prevalent —belief: in bereavement counselling, people often have to be persuaded not to interpret their loss as punishment they have deserved.

Even more remarkably, when Job demands an explanation, at the climax of the book, for the injustice of innocent people's having to suffer, what he gets, in magnificent poetry, is God's demand that he should give up thinking in such terms. He has to give up his picture of God as a moral agent, together with the whole idea of what is fair and unfair. God's sovereignty is revealed as sheer energy, as destructive as creative, in the stars, the sea, the wilderness, wild animals, preying on one another, and in grotesquely and comically monstrous creatures.

In the Bible, human beings are usually centre stage: Adam and Eve, the people of Israel, Moses, and so on; but here, in the Book of Job, this anthropocentric view of life is mercilessly ridiculed.

Nobody knows who composed the Book of Job, or when (before 200 BC, they say), or how it got into the Bible. If it is right for there to be something in the Bible that expresses real rage against God for the unfairness of human life, and something that pictures God as this supreme creator whose raw and savage power eludes all our standards of right and wrong, then the Book of Job has its place in our theology. Maybe, however, you then begin to understand why the compilers of the Lectionary decided not to give us much of the Book of Job to read on Sundays. It needs too much explaining; or rather, it defeats all attempts at explanation. Maybe the Book of Job is better marginalized — neutralized — by the Lectionary. Maybe.

F.K.

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