

## Homily Notes for Sunday, February 7, 2021, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday OT B

OT V [B] (Feb 7) Jb 7:1-4, 6-7; I Cor 9:16-19, 22-23; Mk 1:29-39

### Deacon John Ragland

Today's readings are about secrets. Or, stated differently, the readings are about a great truth, which was once a secret, but is no more. The great truth, now revealed, is this: Our God is a God of compassion, a God who wants to be with us, and to suffer with us.

We see this truth in the story of Job. In this reading, Job laments that life seems a drudgery. Job has suffered "months of emptiness and nights of misery" (Job 7:3). He is filled with restlessness; he is without hope, and he seems convinced that he will never see happiness again.

These are words to which each of us can relate in some way; they describe an experience of desolation, as familiar today, as when the book of Job was written. They raise the perennial question of the meaning of suffering: Why do I suffer? Why do the innocent suffer right along with the not so innocent? Every authentic religion must confront these questions.

But to appreciate Job's lament, and to hear Job's answer to the perennial question, you have to know the *whole* story. If you haven't done so, I would strongly urge you to go home today and read, or reread, the little book of Job. It is a classic.

The book begins with a pious and upright Job enjoying great prosperity. One day Satan, after "going to and fro on the earth," comes to the Lord and proposes that Job be tested. Take away his prosperity, Satan suggest, and he will *surely* blaspheme God. And so it happens. Job loses everything – his property, his children, his good health. He is in a miserable state, but *still* he does not complain against God. Instead, he turns to his friends for condolence. In a series of speeches they argue that his suffering *must* be punishment for some wrongdoing. Job must repent of whatever he has done wrong. But, Job can find nothing for which he should repent. Job eventually reaches the conclusion, that even the just must suffer, that we cannot probe into the depths of the divine omniscience. His conclusion is summed up in the words, "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

When we suffer, Job's words are somewhat consoling. But, we know there is yet more. We know that God is a God of compassion. To understand compassion, it

helps to start with the Latin roots. It comes from two words, *cum*, meaning “with” and *patior* or *passio*, meaning “to suffer.” Thus, compassion means to suffer *with* someone. As followers of Christ, We believe that God suffers with humankind. Whenever we suffer as Job did, God is not an un-interested bystander; God is intimately involved in our suffering. That is the great truth that was still a secret in Job’s time.

It was still a secret at the start of Mark’s gospel. If you pick up any good commentary on Mark, you will hear about the “messianic secret.” Throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus will be shown healing and performing miracles, but there is usually a cautionary word to his followers: don’t say anything about this. Keep it quiet.” In today’s gospel, it is the demons who are not permitted to reveal the truth about Jesus.

Why the secrecy on Jesus’s part? I think it is because Jesus recognize that his followers might easily miss the truth about God’s compassion. He knew that those who witnessed the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, the curing of those who were ill, the freeing of those possessed by demons – – those people might see him merely as a healer, a miracle worker. Truly, compassion does involve acts of kindness and concern for others, but the core meaning is to suffer *with* someone, to be present to the other person, to help another bear suffering, and thereby to learn better how to bear our own suffering. The disciples of Jesus would not fully realize this truth until they had witnessed his suffering on the cross, and had encountered him as the risen Christ. Then the truth would be revealed. Then they would be living in the age of no secrets. Then they would know that, indeed, God is a God of compassion, who suffers with humankind.

It is when we get to Paul that we see there are no more secrets. Paul’s writings are filled with the excitement of the gospel; he has the energy, even the intoxication, of the truth fully realized. When he is weak, he knows God suffers with him. God was one of the first great witnesses in the age of no secrets. We live in that age as well, the age of no secrets. We too must witness to the truth about God’s compassion. We must be the mediators of God’s compassion to the world. But we can only witness to that truth, if we know what compassion is.