

Experiencing alienation, suffering and uncertainty may lead to true compassion

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Pentecost + 20 B – Job 23 1-9, 16-17, Ps 22 1-15, Heb 4 12-16, Mk 10 17-31

Heb 4.15 we don't have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Today our scripture readings are about people being tested: their pain thresholds are tested; their faith is tested; their relationships with family and friends are tested; their commitment to God is tested. We've heard Job's cry of fearful despair, ¹⁷*If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face.* Then the Psalmist's anguished cry, *My God, I cry to you by day, but you don't answer: and by night also I take no rest.* And in the Gospel, when Jesus calls the rich man to exchange his worldly inheritance for the inheritance of eternal life he seeks, the test is beyond him, and we witness his shocked grief as he goes away from Jesus.

We'd have more difficulty relating to all this if it hadn't been for the past eighteen months where the pandemic response has seen the world turned upside down for us and billions of people. Old certainties have been swept away; connections with friends and family cruelly disrupted; people's jobs dramatically changed – if they haven't disappeared altogether – and making plans for the future has become frustratingly provisional. Most unusually for citizens of a country like Australia, we've had a taste of what life is like for much of the world much of the time. So this morning's readings may

speak to us more immediately than they usually do.

Job, the Psalm and the Gospel give eloquent portraits of human suffering in the face of God's apparent silence, and Hebrews gives us Christ entering into that pain as both the mediator between us and God, and as the embodiment of both us and God.

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This comes up in so many conversations – the question of where God is when it hurts. So many people are caught up in the apparent meaninglessness of *their* chronic pain, or that of their loved ones. Yet we, the Church, assert that God loves us. Does this make sense? How can God really be loving if this sort of thing is allowed? There are people all over the world asking this question right now – children orphaned by Covid, medical staff bearing the brunt of the unspeakable suffering of patients cut off from their families.

Online, there's a parallel pandemic of unfeeling opportunism which makes things even worse for the victims of Covid. Where on earth is God? It's no wonder that people feel cut off from the love of God when so much of the commentary offers such a cruel parody of the care God wants for them. People feel cut off.

Our readings today speak out of that experience of being cut off. They face the fact head on that being a person of faith doesn't give us immunity from suffering or misfortune or unfulfilment. Job's is a story of someone whose world collapsed around him. His neighbours turned out to be the exact opposite of the proverbial friends in need. His faith was no guarantee of him finding meaning in his suffering. And the Psalmist laments God's silence in the midst of terrible pain. And then, out of the blue, we run into that rich man in the gospel. He had all his financial and religious ducks in a row in *this* life, but he wasn't confident of his place in the

next.

Faith is no insurance against being a mortal human. The rich man sensed this, so he asked Jesus, *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* It's a question someone only asks if they've inherited everything they need in this life. Now he wants to know how he can inherit the life to come? The heart of this story is where *Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'* Give away your family inheritance; your responsibility to your parents and your children; all you've been entrusted with; everyone you belong to. Go, give it to the poor. Then come and join me, says Jesus. I offer you a new family; me and my followers.

Jesus, looking at us, loves us. He calls us to be his family – to work with him to alleviate people's poverty, their fear, their illnesses and their loneliness – to adopt these dear ones into Christ's family by being family to them, and by doing that, to end the silence they've endured when they cried out for God.

And these stories today make me ask if there's one more thing Jesus is asking of us – whether we may need to experience alienation and suffering and uncertainty like Job and the Psalmist and the rich man did so that we can offer true compassion to the poor and the needy – the compassion that comes from experience – maybe even of poverty. Then through us, these dear ones might just meet the one *who's able to sympathize with all our weaknesses, because we've been tested as they are.* Amen