

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Job 7:1-4.6-7 / Mark 1:29-39)

07.02.2021

A time to lament

Job's complaint heard in our 1st reading is a poignant cry. Job is a man who has lost loved ones in tragic circumstances, who has been deprived of his material wealth and who is sick and rejected by all. His words give expression to a real experience of suffering and pain.

The year 2020 and the 1st month of 2021 have been difficult for everybody, right around the world – quite horrendous for many. While the vaccine is a sign of hope we must acknowledge that the pandemic will have many financial, physical and psychological consequences on men, women, and children of all ages.

In brief we can make our own Job's words: "Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?' Risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!'"

As Christians, the first thing we have to do is to present to the Lord all the feelings which are simmering – or boiling – in our hearts, all the thoughts that are spinning around our heads.

Today, more than ever maybe, we must speak to our heavenly Father in prayer and hand over to him all that is weighing heavily in our personal lives and in the life of the world. Like Job we must be honest and say: "I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul." (7:11).

Too often in our prayer times, we do not dare to be true to God. We think that we should always be nice and polite with God and so we gloss over the real problems in our lives.

The spiritual journey of Job shows us that God is ready to listen to us. In fact, he wants to hear us speak to him about what really matters in our lives and he expects us to say it in a way which reflects what we truly feel, not what we think we should feel. At this time of global crisis, it is appropriate for us to let God know that we do not understand what is going on the world over, and even to dare to ask him whether or not he is still the loving Father he claims to be. Our anger, our fears, our frustration do not offend God when they come from a bleeding and wounded heart, on the contrary they show him that we take him seriously.

The book of Job encourages us in this regard. After Job had been accused by his so-called friends of blaspheming against God and of being a sinner through and through, God said to the friends: "My wrath is kindled against you, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

"There is a time to lament" (Eccl. 3:4) and maybe the Psalms are the best guide for us in our search for words and in our desire to pray. According to the Jewish scholar André Chouraqui, the book of Psalms is "more than a book, it is a living being who speaks, who suffers, groans and dies and rises again, and speaks on the threshold of eternity" (quoted in the introduction of *The Psalms: Singing Version*, p. 8).

What Chouraqui describes and what Job experienced is that prayer begins with real life, it is about heart speaking to heart, our wounded hearts dialoguing with the wounded heart of Christ in the Trinity, our feelings and emotions finding an echo in the heart of God.

The book of Psalms and the story of Job describe this dialogue in terms of a journey. When we pray, we walk part of the road with God, a road that no one else can travel for us, a road that will not lead us necessarily to where we would like to go but to where God wants to

bring us. The psalms mirror our agonies and our resurrections, they help us to walk the path which goes from sorrow to joy.

As we draw closer to God in prayer, with the psalms or with our own words, we begin to see things from God's point of view. Because we are in his light we are able to look at the world and at all things in it from his perspective. That does not mean that the situation in which we find ourselves is suddenly radically different but it does mean that we are able to relate to the situation in a new way.

We are all tempted to have tunnel vision and to believe that what we see is the whole of reality rather than just a part of it. To pray should bring us to a place where we see the bigger picture. To pray in a time of pandemic must begin with a certain kind of lament, the expression of a certain form of sadness. While it is important not to deny the reality, in prayer we are led to insert the same reality into something deeper, greater, and broader. We bring it to the heart of God.

Opening our mouths in prayer will open our hearts and our eyes to a new horizon; but we must consent to the fact that this new horizon will not necessarily be seen as speedily as we might hope. It does not operate like a magic wand. To pray is the journey of a life time, during which in accord with God's own pace, we become who we are supposed to be. In fact, for us to lament in prayer is never our final prayer, it is the prayer of the meantime, it is a prayer which is always open to a future that God has in store for each one of us, and so our lamentation is proof of our trust in God who "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20).

The challenge set before us by Job is to accept that prayer must include all the aspects of our lives, the whole of our humanness. Just as he did in Galilee, Jesus must cast out many devils today: one is the devil which keeps us closed in upon ourselves and prevents us from relating freely to God our loving Father.

When we pray, as our field of vision expands and our heart is widened, we become able to embrace all our brothers and sisters in humanity. This explains why when we pray we are never alone, we always pray as members of a Body which encompasses the whole of the universe, the past, the present and the future.

"O my Strength, it is you to whom we turn,
For you, O God, are our stronghold,
The God who shows us love." (Ps 59:17)