

1 Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 28 October - One World Week (Year B)
Job 42.1-6, 10-17; Psalm 126; Hebr.7.23-8; Mark 10.46-52

Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging. We need somewhere that we feel at home, understand what's going on, know ourselves loved without having to work at it. For that reason it's entirely natural that we become part of communities, within families, among friends, at work, and that we belong to them, cherishing the company of like-minded people and fitting in without having to try into the culture around us. Communities like these are complex things which have evolved over centuries, which is why, though I have lived in my village for almost twenty years, I am still an outsider to the real locals. Any kind of disturbance to our familiar world can be quite disturbing. We find it difficult to live outside it, where we don't know people, aren't sure what the rules and customs are, and have to make a real effort if we are to become part of it. It's much easier to be negative, to concentrate on the differences, to complain that people are unfriendly or that we couldn't possibly live like that.

How very strange the world of others can appear to be. Yet this Sunday, as last, we have been encouraged to move beyond the comfort zone and to think of ourselves as part of a single, world-wide community, with common problems and shared opportunities. Modern Westerners are much more mobile than our ancestors of even two or three generations back. We travel the world as few of them did and our lives are less stable, less rooted in particular places and people. We move house and jobs and are faced with becoming part of unfamiliar communities; relationships break down; the last of the children leaves home; we suffer the loss of those we have loved the most. We do not always recognise how inherently stressful such experiences are. Churches are not exempt from the process. It can take a long time to settle in a new congregation, even of the same denomination, let alone one which is different or away from your own culture, and some people never make the transition. You worry that you don't always understand what's going on and that you are not part of it. I know how much we want to welcome visitors and strangers to this congregation and make them feel at home; yet I also know how hard it can be for them to settle. All kinds of

little things can make them feel that they're not really part of the community - not because we want that to happen but because we have a shared local culture which is strange to them and takes time to assimilate.

If we have trouble moving from one place or church to another within the same country, how ever are we to imagine what One World Week means? We can say we're citizens of the world but we only have to leave our comfort zone behind to realise how much we depend on the bit of it we know. Yet as Christians we are called to affirm that God's creation is one creation and that everything which is part of it is connected with everything else. We are first and foremost children of a loving Father who is constantly calling us to find our true home in his kingdom, however often we stray from the path. This is not our special possession, it is God's gift to the whole human race, which we are to share freely, so that the reason we campaign for those whose lives are blighted by war, disease, poverty and hunger is not that it is fashionable but that our theology compels us to it. We live in a world the delicate and complex fabric of which human thoughtlessness and greed is damaging, sometimes destroying, in the pollution of rivers and the oceans, in the short-term profits and long-term loss from the burning down of the rain forests. The reason we campaign for a greener world is not because it is the flavour of the month but because our theology of creation demands it.

But there is a real tension here, between the lives we live among familiar people and places and our longing for a better, fairer, cleaner world. We know that words are not sufficient to bridge that gap but it seems so enormous that we can feel quite powerless. We have a vision in Jesus Christ of the kingdom of God, and we can campaign to remove the obstacles to its coming among us, as we do, by becoming associated with Fair Trade, Christian Aid, Commitment for Life and the wider political environment. But the paradox is that we also respond best to this calling by being attentive to issues close at hand. Small gestures - tins for the food bank, links with community organisations, ministry to those whose needs are the greatest - may seem like the tiniest specks in an ocean of problems but they have real substance, and the specks can

join up to form little islands of hope.

Now you may think that the link between Job and One world week is tenuous, but it isn't, and for two reasons. First, the story of Job is a story of everyman. It signals that it is story in the most time-honoured fashion: once upon a time there was a man called Job in the land of Uz, and it comes with the traditional happy ending. Second, I bet you didn't know that the Hebrew translation of Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* is *The Wizard of Uz*. No one knows exactly where Uz was in the Middle East, but one thing is sure, it wasn't in Israel or Judah, and Job is not Jewish. He is a God-fearing man but his faith is not specified beyond that. It's a good book on which to finish One World Week, because so many people in so many places continue to pass through a similar intensity of suffering, losing entire families, communities and homes, and the agony of Job is their agony too. The truth of Job is not to be found in identifying him with a particular person or place, but in the arguments the story contains. Some of them are arguments with traditional explanations of evil found elsewhere in the Bible: that the Lord punishes to the third and the fourth generation (as in Exodus); or that individuals must take responsibility for their sins and not blame their problems on those who went before (as in Ezekiel). Both are rejected. But what is affirmed?

I'll make no secret of the fact that I find the ending of Job problematic. Happy endings don't always happen. This week I had a phone call from a friend considerably younger than me who has an inoperable cancer; meanwhile, his mother is having to cope at the same time with her terminally ill husband. I can't see a happy ending there, though if you could hold the Owen family in your prayers for a moment I am sure it would be appreciated. In the story Job receives double back. The so-called 'gospel of prosperity', popular in some Christian circles, argues that if we do God's will he will bless us by increasing our material possessions. I wonder why they don't read those Psalms which struggle with the question of why the wicked prosper in the world.

In his book *The Great Code*, the American critic Northrop Frye argues that in Job we see summed up the whole of biblical narrative: 'Job seems to have gone the entire

circuit, from creation and fall through the plagues of Egypt, the sayings of the fathers transmitting law and wisdom, the flash of prophetic insight that breaks the chain of wisdom, and on to the final vision of presence and the knowledge that in the midst of death we are in life.’ He follows, Frye says, ‘not the horizontal line of precedent and prudence’ his friends advise ‘but the U-shaped progression of original prosperity, descent to humiliation, and return.’ And he notes something we may well miss: that the restoration of Job’s fortunes begins when Job prayed for his friends. There follows the restoration of human community, as his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before come to his house, eat bread with him, and bring him sympathy and comfort. Once that has happened, the natural world begins to flourish again and a new chapter in Job’s family life begins. Isn’t that a lesson we should take to heart for the healing of our one world? Prayer, warm compassion, sharing what we have,

My old friend and former colleague at Sussex, the novelist and critic Gabriel Josipovici, points out in his wonderful work on the Bible, *The Book of God*, how Job also repeats the pattern of the story of Joseph, in his descent from prosperity through suffering and loss to an even greater prosperity in Egypt which enables him to be reunited with the brothers who sold him into slavery. He adds: ‘We are simply asked to recognize the mysterious connections between cause and effect, to recognize how little *we* can understand them. This does not mean that all is random. There seems to be a pattern, but what that pattern is will always escape us.’ Muriel Spark’s novel *The Only Problem*, is about a man trying to write an essay on the book of Job. According to Josipovici, it ‘shows that man must neither simply accept that there is a story nor refuse to believe that there is one, but that it is his duty constantly to question God (and himself) about it. In Kierkegaard’s wonderful phrase, it keeps “the wound of the negative open”.’ I am not sure I understand what that means, but I am sure that Joel will be able to explain it to us when he’s back.

Does a sense of this larger perspective help? It can. I sometimes think about my maternal grandparents, victims of the Holocaust, and how they worked to ensure that both their daughters could escape the Nazi terror. They met their deaths without

knowing what I know, that they were to receive double - four grandsons, four great-grandchildren. It is part of the same story as the pattern which runs right through the Bible: of creation, fall and loss, and restoration; of homeland, exile and return. It is, of course, the story of Jesus himself, given to us as the living embodiment of the kingdom of God, crucified by us for threatening our ease, risen for us to show the way to the new creation. It does not matter who we are or which part of God's one world we belong to, because this is a pattern which touches us all at our most vulnerable and frightened, when nothing seems to make sense any more and the darkness threatens to engulf us. Here, today, in this little church community, we affirm that God's one world is a good world, and we renew our intention to do what by his grace we can to restore that goodness wherever it is denied.

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Order of Service
Sunday 28 October 2012 – One World Week

Prelude

Entry of the Bible and minister

Greeting and Call to Worship (Psalm 126.5-7)

Hymn 118 Praise to the living God! (Asia)

Prayers of approach, confession, forgiveness

Introduction: end of the Job cycle; objects and stories for one world

Readings Job 42. 1-6, 10-17

Mark 10.46-52

Hymn 85 God in his love for us lent us this planet (Europe)

Sermon

Hymn 643 When Israel was in Egypt's land (Afro-American)

Notices

Prayers of intercession

Offering and doxology (403, Laudate omnes gentes, three times)

Lord's Prayer

Hymn 625 God of freedom, God of justice (Australasia)

Dismissal and Blessing

Postlude

The Bible precedes the minister out of the sanctuary