

Friendship

Sunday 10 May 2009 – Rev Lance Thomas

Job 15:1-35

One day Pooh Bear is about to go for a walk in the Hundred Acre Wood. Its about 11:30 in the morning. It's a fine time to go calling, just before lunch. So Pooh sets out across the stream stepping on the stones and when he gets right in the middle of the stream he sits down on a warm stone and thinks about where would be the best place to make a call. He says to himself, I think I'll go and see Tigger. No, he dismisses that. Then he says, Owl, I'll go and see Owl. 'No Owl uses big words, hard to understand words'. At last he brightens up 'I know I think I'll go and see Rabbit. I like Rabbit. Rabbit uses encouraging words like 'how about lunch' and 'help yourself Pooh! Yes, I'll go and see Rabbit.'

Pooh knows what he wants in a friend. Encouraging words.

Eugene Kennedy says 'The main business of friendship is to sustain and make bearable each others' burdens. We may do more of this as friends than we do anything else.'

Job, the focus of last weeks message is supported in his most depressing struggle by three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zephar. Job's friends don't seem to have any of the repertoire of encouraging words that Rabbit has, nor an understanding of the main business of friendship that Kennedy describes.

As we know from last week the book of Job is a poem, probably the oldest literature we have in the Bible. It's the story of Job who is described as the wealthiest man in the East. But a man who in one day loses all his wealth. Sheep, camels, servants, even his children, and at the same time, is struck down with a horrendous skin condition.

I think the poetry itself describes Job's condition best and captures the heartache of anyone who has tumbled so dramatically from the highs of status and well being to the lows of nothingness and depravation.

Chapter 29:1-25

¹Job said:

²I long for the past,
when God took care of me,
³and the light from his lamp
showed me the way through the dark.

⁴I was in the prime of life,
God All-Powerful
was my closest friend,
⁵and all of my children were nearby.

⁶My herds gave enough milk
to bathe my feet,
and from my olive harvest
flowed rivers of oil.

⁷When I sat down at the meeting
of the city council,

⁸the young leaders stepped aside,

⁹while the older ones stood

¹⁰and remained silent.

¹¹Everyone was pleased
with what I said and did.

¹²When poor people or orphans cried out for help,
I came to their rescue.

¹³And I was highly praised
for my generosity to widows and others in poverty.

¹⁴Kindness and justice were my coat and hat;

¹⁵I was good to the blind
and to the lame.

¹⁶I was a father to the needy,
and I defended them in court,
even if they were strangers.

¹⁷When criminals attacked,
I broke their teeth and set their victims free.

¹⁸I felt certain that I would live
a long and happy life,
then die in my own bed.

¹⁹In those days I was strong
like a tree with deep roots
and with plenty of water,

²⁰or like an archer's new bow.

²¹Everyone listened in silence
to my welcome advice,

²²and when I finished speaking,
nothing needed to be said.

²³My words were eagerly accepted
like the showers of spring,

²⁴and the smile on my face
renewed everyone's hopes.

²⁵My advice was followed
as though I were a king
leading my troops,
or someone comforting
those in sorrow.

Chapter 30:1-15

¹Young people now insult me,
although their fathers
would have been a disgrace
to my sheep dogs.

²And those who insult me
are helpless themselves.

³They must claw the desert sand
in the dark for something
to satisfy their hunger.

⁴They gather tasteless shrubs
for food and firewood,

⁵and they are run out of towns,
as though they were thieves.

⁶Their only homes are ditches
or holes between rocks,

⁷where they bray like donkeys
gathering around shrubs.

⁸And like senseless donkeys
they are chased away.

⁹Those worthless nobodies
make up jokes and songs
to disgrace me.

¹⁰They are hateful
and keep their distance,
even while spitting
in my direction.

¹¹God has destroyed me,
and so they don't care
what they do.

¹²Their attacks never stop,
though I am defenseless,
and my feet are trapped.

¹³Without any help,
they prevent my escape,

destroying me completely
14 and leaving me crushed.

15 Terror has me surrounded;
my reputation and my riches
have vanished like a cloud.

Job has copped his fair share and then some. Does he ever need a friend!

Pepper Rogers, a sports coach tells of a time when his team couldn't win anything, the fans and the press, everyone was down on him. He recalls 'My dog was my only friend. I told my wife that a man needed at least two friends and she bought me another dog'.

Well, Job has three friends and they come together to give him comfort. They sit with Job for a week. In fact they enter into his grief, putting dust on their heads and crying bitterly. But mostly they sat silently because they realised the terrible pain he was in.

At this point I think Job has three good friends. They sit with him and they are grieved by his grief. But then Job starts to whinge and moan. If he's not allowed to then none of us are. But in his whinge-ing he complains to and about God.

Job's friends believe in God. They know God. I find it interesting that this is the time of Abraham or maybe even earlier and there are a number of families that worship the one God. Abraham was not God's only option to be the Patriarch of the chosen.

So, Job's friends are worshippers of God and in their addresses to Job they show a depth of thought and understanding about God's ways with humankind. Some of it is rich and worthy of inclusion in our understandings of God. But they make the mistake that many believers make in this sort of situation. They set out to defend God. To prove to Job that his cries to and about God are wrong. They prove to be of no help to Job at all.

Water was the life blood of the caravans that travelled the trade routes of the day. In particularly dry and harsh conditions a caravan may arrive at an oasis desperately in need of water. It did happen that they would arrive and find the water all dried up. Their hopes are dashed and their situation is perilous. They face the prospect of dying of thirst. In a similar way Job turned to his friends in his hour of need, expecting to find much-needed comfort. To his disappointment they respond with rebuke and criticism cloaked in theological jargon.

My friends I am desperate
And you should help me
Even if I no longer respect
God all powerful
But you are as treacherous
As streams that swell
With melting snow
Then suddenly disappear in the summer heat.
I am like a caravan lost in the desert
While searching for water.

Not only do Job's well intending friends fail to bring him comfort, fail to sustain and make bearable his burden, they gain the displeasure of God.

When God speaks later in the poem he rebukes Job's friends.

He says to Eliphaz – 'I am angry at you and your two friends for not telling the truth. So I want you to go over to Job and offer seven bulls and seven goats on an altar as a sacrifice to please me. After this Job will pray and I will agree not to punish you for your foolishness'.

Well intentioned, sincere, forgivable but costly foolishness.

I find Job's comforters pop up quite often. People who feel they have to defend God, speak for God in situations. I have heard people tell parents of children who have died, why God allowed their child to die. I have yet to hear an explanation that is of any real comfort and mostly I would question the God concept, the idea of what God is like, behind these statements.

This is an easy trap to fall into. In pain and grief people will often say things like - why has God let this happen to me? Why is God doing this to us? Mostly they are not looking for an answer, not

expecting one from us, it's a cry of pain. But even if they are looking for an answer, the only genuine response we can make is pretty much to be silent and know God can answer for himself. What are people looking for in a friend? Particularly when they face the traumas of life. Encouraging words. Someone to share the burden, just by acknowledging its weight its pain. Someone just to be there. Job's friends started well, they came, they acknowledged the grief and shared in it the best they could. They sat in silence with their friend.

But what was needed in this friendship was more silence. Just let Job get it out. If he had God wrong, God and Job would sort it out.

One of the most useful pieces of wisdom I have taken on is the realisation that people need to talk out their grief, their pain, and they need to keep talking about it until they are sick of telling it. Which often comes a long time after you are sick of hearing it.

So a friend is one who is willing to listen to the same story over and over and over again until you are ready to move on.

Friends are available

Friends listen

Friends encourage

Friends go the journey with us

We can't finish any discussion on friends without mentioning the most amazing friendship. Jesus seeks to be our friend. He's speaking to his disciples, but they in turn are called to make us all disciples, so I believe he is talking to each of us, who rightly see him as our Lord. But he says, 'I do not call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends'.

Jesus wants to be with us, encourage us, support us, love us. Be our friend.