

## *Life is Short*

Sunday 3 May 2009 – Rev Lance Thomas  
Job 17:1-16

Read poem 'The Elephant in the room'.

I got 32% in School C English, so English has never been my strength. But I love words and I understand enough about language to appreciate poetry, as an invitation into understanding through the beauty of language and the power of picture.

That poem I read is one of favourites in a book of poems, 'Snapshots on the journey through death and remembrance'. We all know there is no literal, great big grey animal in the room, but we also know exactly the experience of the elephant in the room.

Over the next three weeks we are going to be looking at the book of Job. And the first thing I want us to grasp as we come to this book is that it is poetry. It's a big chunk of poetry. The great reformer, Martin Luther, who was a pretty gifted writer and translator himself, said that Job was 'more magnificent and sublime than any other book of scripture'.

Alfred Lord Tennyson who, as Poet Laureate of England, so should have known, called Job 'the greatest poem of both ancient and modern literature'.

Although the poem was written in Hebrew the power of much of the language has survived translation to such a degree that some phrases have become part of everyday language.

*My hair stood on end  
Take my life in my hands  
The root of the matter  
Put your hand over your mouth  
The land of the living  
Great men are not always wise  
The gates of death  
The smell of battle  
I know my redeemer lives*

The poem is full of colourful imagery. The scripture reading we had a moment ago has Job looking for death, he says  
'My life is drawing to an end

Hope has disappeared

But all my friends can do is offer empty hope.

I could tell the world below to prepare a bed.

Then I could greet the grave

As my father

And say to the worms

'Hello mother and sisters'.

Isn't that fantastic!

Job was a wealthy man who lived about, even a little before, the time of Abraham. A time when great men's wealth was measured in terms of the size of their flocks, the number of donkeys, oxen, camels, their servants or slaves, the number of their sons. The scripture says he was the wealthiest man in the East. Yet in one day his whole world is turned upside down.

Job's sons and daughters were having a feast in the home of his oldest son when someone rushed up to Job. While your servants were ploughing with your oxen and your donkeys were nearby eating grass, a gang of Sabeans attacked and stole the oxen and donkeys. Your other servants were killed and I was the only one who escaped to tell you.

The servant was still speaking when a second one came running up and saying 'God sent down a fire that killed your sheep and your servants, I am the only one who escaped to tell you.'

Before that servant had finished speaking a third one raced up and said 'Three gangs of Chaldeans attacked and stole all your camels and I am the only one who escaped to tell you'.

That servant was still speaking when a fourth one dashed up and said, 'your children were having a feast and drinking wine at the home of your oldest son, when suddenly a windstorm from the desert blew the house down, crushing all your children. I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.'

Wow!

Absolutely devastated – nevertheless, Job gets down on his knees and says, 'naked I came into this world and naked I shall return. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord'.

Wow again.

We know something that Job doesn't. The calamities that have befallen Job, have been allowed by God, because Satan claims Job's faithfulness is only because Job is so blessed and protected by God.

After Job proves to be faithful Satan says it is because God has protected Job's health. So God relents again and Job breaks out in painful boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.

Then Job sat on the ash heap to show his sorrow, and while he was scraping his sores with a broken piece of pottery his wife asked 'why do you still trust God?' Why don't you curse him and die?'

Job replied, 'Don't talk like a fool! If we accept blessings from God, we much accept trouble as well.'

At this point Job is visited by three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who had heard of what had happened to Job and come to bring him comfort.

The largest part of the poem is taken up with a back and forth dialogue between Job and his so called comforters. We are going to look at their friendship next week.

The introduction may give us the wrong impression of Job. This is not the story of a man suffering silently, patiently in the night. This is the story of a man yelling at God - a man who wants answers to just one question. Why?

Why do all people suffer some, and especially why do the righteous suffer? We will look at that more closely in the third message.

As Job's struggles are dramatically explored in the debates between him and his friends, amazing wisdom and insight into human nature and the human condition are explored. I want to finish this day on just one of them.

Life is short, says Job.

He says 'life is like a fast moving needle. It is short for every living soul, we are flowers that fade and shadows that vanish'.

We don't easily accept just how short life can be. There is still within each of us some of the sense of immortality, the domain of the young. And hopefully we know, even preferably are in a place where we know the joy of things going well in life and we don't want to think about that coming to an end.

But Job is right. Life is short. I am sure Job would consider all his sufferings, thousands of years ago, somewhat worthwhile if we could learn from him, and not have to personally go through the sufferings he did to gain his understanding.

Life is short is a piece of wisdom not designed to make us morbidly fatalistic, but instead to encourage us to make the fullest use of what we have.

Life is short, use it well.

The book of Job is poetry. Poetry seems to be more about getting us thinking, raising the right questions, tickling our emotions, inviting us into the quest, rather than giving us pat answers. So we are not going to find the whole answer to anything in this book. But on the other hand this poem contains plenty of pointers in the right direction for those who have eyes to see.

Job finds himself in a new place. A new season, a good deal of the poem is about trying to make sense of this new place. This very different season in his life.

A friend was telling me the other day of a time when she was the mother of three young children, whom she had taken to the library. After some time taken supporting three individual struggles to find just the right books among the huge selection, she arrived at the counter looking a little frazzled by the experience. The librarian at the counter, summed up the situation at a glance, smiled and said, 'Make the most of it, it doesn't last long'. The frazzled young mum couldn't quite see the attraction. But looking back now she can. Those times pass so quickly.

Job, a father of grown children probably was well aware of the seasons of life and the need to embrace each one as it comes along.

Earlier in the service we looked at the things that bring us joy in life. I think we can see that those things change from season to season. Embrace the season you are in, it will not last. Says Job.

Job's story has at another level something of the battle between God and Satan for the control of Job's life. Jesus sums up God's desire for our lives in the words, 'I come to give you life, life in all its fullness'. But he also points out that our lives are at the heart of God's battle with the Devil. "The thief comes to steal life." That's another pointer in the poem.

One last thing for today that comes from this poem. Although it gives an account of a struggle to understand God's ways with humankind, that comes very early, historically speaking, very early in our understanding of God's ways. It contains the most developed thoughts of life after death found anywhere in the Old Testament.

"I wish that my words  
could be written down  
or chiselled into rock.  
I know that my Saviour lives  
and at the end  
he will stand on the earth .  
My flesh may be destroyed  
yet from this body  
I will see God  
Yes I will see him for myself  
and I long for that moment. " Job 19 23-27

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is somewhat more direct than Job. 'Don't store up treasure on earth ... instead store up your treasure in heaven'.

Let's bring together the learning we can take away today from our brief look at this poem.

Life is short.

Life is short use it well.

But how do we use it well?

Recognise the seasons of life, embrace the one we are in, it has challenges, joys, delights, even tragedies, that will only be experienced in this season. Embrace them.

Recognise that God's desire is for us to experience the fullest life possible. The tempter seeks to steal life from us. A few verses on, in the Sermon on the Mount than the ones I have quoted, Jesus identifies one of the prime weapons of the one who comes to steal life – it is worry! 'I tell you do not worry about your life,' says Jesus. Worry won't add a minute to the length of your life. The older I get the more I realise how much energy I have wasted worrying. You know, I can't think of one thing in my life that I have managed to change by worrying about it. Perhaps another weapon of the one who comes to steal life that Job would identify is time. Life is short don't allow your time to be robbed by the unnecessary, the unproductive, the blah of life. Television has been described by some as the instrument of the Devil, because of its content. I suspect as bad as the content may sometimes be, its most effective strategy in robbing us of life is the time it steals from us.

Finally in the strategies of using our short life well, is investing it well. Job says life is short, Jesus says don't waste it by storing up treasures on earth that moths and rust can destroy, that thieves can steal (thieves can take on many forms). Invest life in the things of eternity. This life is just a short trip on the way to eternity.