

**Integrity (Job 13. 1-18)**

Sarah Bachelard

Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I don't know what I'm supposed to say? 'What you know, I also know: I am not inferior to you'. But nothing you're saying rings true. 'You whitewash with lies; you are worthless physicians'. I wish you'd just shut up and leave me alone; 'that would be your wisdom!' As for me, I want to argue my case directly with God: 'I will defend my ways to his face'.

With these words, we come to the raw heart of the biblical story of Job. The commentaries call it a 'dialogue' between Job and his friends, but 'dialogue' seems too civilised, too detached, too abstract a word ... Because what's really going on is a life and death struggle, a desperate wrestling about whether and how there is any sense in life, any justice, any possibility of authentic faith in God. What's at stake is the identity, the integrity of each one.

The catalyst for this intensely painful conversation is, as we've seen over the past two weeks, the affliction visited upon the character of Job. He has lost everything, his possessions, children, health, social status, religious belonging - everything that had formerly been his security and given his life meaning. By the end of last week's reading, it had all collapsed; we left him sitting on the dunghill, cursing the day of his birth.

His friends have come to sit with him. And that's no small thing. Job's disease has rendered him ritually unclean, an outcast and sinner. So the fact they turn up at all is a testimony to their good intentions, their willingness to continue in friendship and show mercy. And yet – what soon becomes clear is that these friends can read what has

befallen Job in only one way. For 36 long chapters, they try to convince him that somehow his misfortune is his fault. ‘Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?’ (Job 4.7) asks his friend Eliphaz. They know in principle, as a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy, that if he suffers he must be wrong, God must be right, and therefore that his salvation lies in acknowledging these facts. ‘[Y]ou say, “My conduct is pure” (says his friend Zophar) ... “But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and ... he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! ... Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves”’ (Job 11. 5-6).

And yet for 36 long chapters, Job resists their interpretation of his plight. It’s not that he has an alternative explanation for his suffering – he *doesn’t* understand what’s going on: ‘Teach me, and I will be silent: make me understand how I have gone wrong’ (Job 6. 24), he says. And yet, he cannot find peace in the account they offer, and he will not just say what they want him to say: ‘I *will* give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me’. (Job 10. 1-2). His life has catapulted him into risky spiritual territory – the potentially blasphemous space of contending with God – but he cannot go back now to the way things were.

And what this opens up is a question of integrity in two dimensions. First is the question of theological integrity. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez has said that at issue between Job and his friends are two ways of doing theology, two ways of practising faith. Job’s friends have a ready-made doctrine – and all they want to do is squeeze Job’s life into it. Job feels the tug of this approach. Up until this moment, it’s what he would have done too: ‘I also could talk as you do, if you were in my place; I could join words together against you, and shake my head at you. I could encourage you with my mouth ...’ (Job 16. 4-5). But it doesn’t fit anymore for him. He knows the right so-called ‘answer’, but the answer doesn’t work. ‘How forceful are honest words! But

your reproof, what does it reprove?’ (Job 6. 25). And many of us know that experience ourselves – how personal encounter with illness, depression, grief, questions about sexuality or gender identity, relationship breakdown and many other things can call into question what might before have been our or our community’s religious ‘certainties’. Suddenly life doesn’t fit the categories we’re trying to apply.

Gutierrez points out that the words of Job’s friends sound increasingly formulaic and repetitive – they say the same things over and over again, there’s no development in their argument. ‘The author of the book’ (he suggests) ‘may be trying to tell us by this wearisome repetition (which contrasts with the development of Job’s thinking) that their theology is an exhausted mine ... The only thing that changes in their speeches is the tone, which becomes steadily more hostile and intolerant’.<sup>1</sup>

Job, on the other hand, is discovering that, in the spiritual life, truth must be living or it isn’t truth. It can’t be second hand but somehow must witness to and express what we’ve come to know for ourselves, what we’re able to inhabit with our lives. Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita remarks that having something to say in the spiritual domain means being *present* in your words, speaking authentically and authoritatively in your own voice.<sup>2</sup>

For Job, in the first instance, speaking in his own voice means sticking with his experience – refusing to be dissuaded of it, even under intense pressure. He will not disavow his sense of his innocence, his sense that nothing he’s done merits the calamitous suffering he is undergoing. ‘As God lives, who has taken away my right ... as long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood ... Far be it from me to say that you are right ... I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days’ (Job 27. 2-6).

---

<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2004), p.208.

This doesn't mean that everything we think about ourselves, every interpretation we make of what happens to us, is beyond question. Sometimes we're not as blameless as we like to think we are. Perhaps even Job will come to see aspects of his life in a different light. It *does* mean, though, that the journey to deepened authenticity must go *through*, rather than bypass our experience, our best sense of the truth of things. In my life, at different times, this has meant sticking with my experience of anger or resentment, my inability to forgive, my inability to pray ... I haven't always been proud of the way I am being, the way I'm reacting, I haven't wanted to be that way – but there's no point pretending it's other than it is. If our experience is going to be transformed, then the whole of us has to be offered up.

At the beginning of the book of Job, his integrity is understood primarily in moral terms – he's blameless, upright. But as he grapples with his difficult reality, refusing to be untrue to himself or pretend he's reacting other than he is, the character of his integrity changes. It's no longer just moral righteousness, but a deeper kind of wholeness which encompasses darkness and light, brokenness and completion. It's an integrity that's brought into being over time, as he engages the costly labour of seeking to be truthful in the midst of confusion and disorientation – preferring to risk blasphemy than settle prematurely for a veneer of piety and religious respectability.

And this changes how we understand faithfulness. The book of Job is clear that being faithful to God is not about going along with well-worn platitudes, but being drawn – sometimes excruciatingly by way of suffering and doubt – into a new and deeper integrity. Being faithful to God is necessarily connected with being faithful to ourselves. And, as we'll see next week, it's as he remains with this long journey of integration that Job finally hears the voice of the living God breaking into his bitter lament, and speaking the truth that will bring him at last to peace.