

## **Benedictus Reflection 17.09.22**

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Recently, I enrolled in a photography course with the University of the Third Age. Its focus is on composition – the various elements that go into composing a picture that makes it pleasing, or satisfying, at least to the photographer. There are some ‘rules’ or guidelines for composition, such as the ‘rule of thirds’, where a picture is divided into thirds vertically and horizontally. Rather than putting one subject right in the middle, you might locate different elements on one of the lines or intersections, which makes for a more satisfying, balanced and dynamic picture.

While our photography course covers such rules, it also approaches composition through learning the visual language. I didn’t know there was a visual language. Our teacher explained that, like written or spoken language, the visual language is a way of telling stories and conveying emotions, through pictures.

When I came to reflect on our theme for tonight – storms – I realised that storms are a remarkable expression of a visual language, with their broiling clouds, flashes of lightening, and driving rain. They include sounds as well with their claps of thunder that send shivers up our spines. Storms are a free concert that nature gives us. So how do we read this visual language? In particular, how do we read what is being said in Job 28 about God and storms? What story is it telling, and what emotions does it convey?

Biblical texts offer us pictures of God. Christian theology, then, has its own set of rules, or guidelines, for how each of these pictures might be brought into a more comprehensive whole, a composition that is more satisfying, balanced and dynamic. Pretty much like the rule of thirds. In fact, very much like the rule of thirds. It is the rule of three, the Christian doctrine that God is a trinity of love: Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. This is important to apply for tonight’s reading where God seems somewhat distant, up in the sky playing with thunderbolts. A bit like Zeus, the Greek God of sky and thunder, or Thor, the Norse God of thunder, rather than the God revealed to us in Christ.

And so, with that introduction in mind, let us look at what is being conveyed in the visual language of God and storms in Job 28.

The reading begins with a question: ‘Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?’ Whatever the following verses say about God and storms will be addressing that question.

The next verse tells us that wisdom ‘is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air’. In other words, creatures are not the source of wisdom. We are incapable of finding wisdom from our own natures, without God, without seeing as God

sees. This is conveyed in the next verse, which I think is key to the connection between wisdom and storms:

‘God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the sun’ (v. 23). We then hear of God fashioning the storm elements. Note the care and tenderness with which God relates to them. God ‘gave the wind its weight’, ‘apportioned the waters’, ‘made a decree for the rain’, and ‘a way for the thunderbolt’. Each part is given its rightful place, and that includes its limits, or portion. It is a system in balance. Now, with global warming, the system is out of balance. We have storms that are out of proportion, disproportionate in their power and destruction.

The reading concludes, ‘And he said to humankind, “Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is understanding”’.

So, what is the connection between God of the rain and thunder, and where wisdom is to be found? As I sat with this question, I began to think about horizons. Let me say a little more.

An horizon is as far as I can see from where I am standing. If I change where I am standing, I see differently. In my house, my horizon is pretty restricted: the walls around me and glimpses of my garden. If I go outside and climb a mountain, my horizon is much greater. I take in a lot more.

When we speak of horizons metaphorically, we refer to what we can see, or perceive, as my ‘world’, what I care about and feel responsible for. If I am small-minded and self-centred, then my horizon of care and responsibility stands around me like a phone booth. However, if I am a little more mature, perhaps have engaged in intentional practices to become more generous and open-hearted, then my sense of care and responsibility take in a whole lot more of this world. The largest possible horizon is God’s, for God ‘looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the sun’. If we apply the rule of three here, that God is a trinity of love, then this looking and seeing is with a deep love.

We find wisdom when we look with love upon the world. Then, what we care about is the health of the planet, and the wellbeing of all in our shared home. We will not find wisdom from being small-minded. Then, what I care about is what I can gain from a situation; how I might come out on top, look better, or have more status or wealth than others.

The horizons we live from also make a difference to how we see justice. From a narrow, self-focussed perspective, justice gets reduced to payback, revenge, retribution, or taking the law into my own hands. From a whole world perspective, justice involves addressing those things that ‘poison the wellspring of our common humanity’<sup>1</sup>, that diminish and demean the lives of some against others. It rights wrongs in a way that enables peace, rather than adding

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<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 35.

more violence to the world. The horizons we live from make a world of difference to how wisely we live.

Now, I don't want to overburden you. None of us can really see as God sees or love as God loves. This reading is about getting a glimpse of God's horizon so that we may live our lives informed by it: thinking globally, acting locally. Such a glimpse helps us also with the last lines of our reading: 'to depart from evil is understanding'.

Note how much wrong-doing comes from people whose circle of concern and responsibility is far too small – those who steal and defraud public monies to feather their own nests, or to gain in power and status; those who turn to violence to get what they want, with no regard for the harm they are causing? When your horizons are expanded, you are turned outward away from yourself, and see others with a loving regard. Your heart and desires are changed. You no longer *want* to harm others, even if you might benefit from it.

I am suggesting that the story being told in the visual language of Job 28 is one about horizons. We are being offered an invitation, along with Job, to come, join God our creator, who lovingly gives each creature its place and limit. See to the ends of the earth, from the clouds, with loving regard.

If that is the story being told, what emotions are being conveyed in this visual language? Well, you will have to answer that for yourselves. For me, humility is one of them. I realise I am a small and rather insignificant part of something much larger than myself. And that is a good thing. Humility is a precondition of wisdom, for it signals we are seeing things in perspective and in proportion, knowing our place as one species among others on this planet. I feel humbled, but not humiliated. For I am applying the rule of three to this reading. While the picture of God in Job focuses on God as creator, who is somewhat remote, we know from other texts that God is for us, came among us, suffered to save us. God lives among us still and dwells in our hearts as Spirit. In God, we live and move and have our being. I am humbled and thankful.

Another emotion conveyed in the last verse is 'fear' of the Lord. How does that come across to you? We all bring our experiences to these readings. If you have had past experiences of authoritarian figures, then you may feel the 'fear' as 'being afraid of', because of the threat of punishment and humiliation. But the rule of three will not allow that reading. The picture of God known through Christ undercuts such a view.

Rather, the word for 'fear' here can also be translated as 'to stand in awe of', 'to reverence and honour', to respect.<sup>2</sup> Some spiritualities make God too small, reduced to 'my friend' with whom I walk daily and chat to about all things of my concern. 'Fear of the Lord' conveys a healthy reverence for the greatness of God, far beyond my little world, without needing to 'be afraid' of God.

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<sup>2</sup> From Jeanette Mathews, Hebrew scholar at St Mark's National Theological Centre, Canberra.

Sometimes we speak of storms to describe dark and turbulent experiences we go through at certain times in our lives. What I have been saying about horizons may be helpful in these experiences as well.

A stormy period may be when a number of difficulties happen to us at the same time. We feel overwhelmed, tossed about, battered, a bit like Job, really. When this happens, it is easy for our world to shrink, for us to focus on just managing the pain and suffering. And that is OK. It still helps, though, to remain open to a larger perspective, to know that storms come and go, that this particular storm is only one small part of a much larger life, and that even in storms there are invitations.

A second kind of storm experience has its rightful place in the spiritual life. As we begin to leave our old selves behind, with our habitual reactions and ways of being, and start to live into new ways of being and acting, we may go through stages of feeling all at sea, threatened, disoriented. This is part of the journey, what it means to grow in wisdom, to move from a small horizon to become more generous-hearted selves. Embrace these storms and know that God is in them with you.

I began by offering a way of seeing tonight's reading as a visual language, a picture of God, that tells a story and conveys emotions. We have applied the rule of three to that picture to balance out what might seem like a distant God, and to discern the way of wisdom as a healthy respect for our creator. God's invitation to wisdom involves lifting our horizons – not just our sights but also our hearts. In communion services, we are invited to 'Lift up your hearts'. May we 'Lift them to the Lord', and in doing so, find wisdom and understanding.

Amen