

I've been thinking about Job. I think about Job quite a lot. God said that there is no one on earth like Job – he was upright and blameless. Then proceeds to let Job be tested. Job takes his complaints to the Lord, his friends come and aren't much help.

We are like Job, seen by God as righteous and blameless in Christ Jesus. But we are being tested, challenged, finding ourselves in a hard place, wondering where we are headed.

Some of us wondering - do we have a future, has God forgotten us.

Or

are we feeling self-sufficient, are we being self-reliant, we think we are doing quite well, are we asking God to watch us while we get on and build the church.

God answers Job. And what an answer.

Instead of being kind and understanding of Job, God launches into a series of questions that are framed to put the very clear distinction between who God is and who Job and his friends are. Not very good pastoral care! This is crushing for Job. 'My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' It was crushing for Moses at the burning bush, or Isaiah in the year the King Uzziah died, and when Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured before them, or when John, while on Patmos, sees Jesus.

However God asks Job to intercede for his friends and God says He will answer Job's prayers. God still accepts Job, Moses, Isaiah, Peter, James and John, you and I.

Is the Lord allowing us to be tested this way so that we realise that we can't do this on our own, that we need Him? Is He wanting us to see who He is? Is He responding to us in much the same way He did to Job? Have we got to the point Job got to and fall on our knees before the Creator of the universe, our lover and redeemer?

As I have moved about the Synod as both Moderator as well as Mission Advisor working with congregations and listening to our talk I have been left wondering if we have made some sort of smorgasbord of God – created something in our own image. We take those bits we like about God and decide to drop the bits that we find uncomfortable or that don't fit into our way of thinking in these 'oh so enlightened times!' Much of our conversations around God sound so arrogant as if He is some sort of concept or theory, not the living dynamic Creator. The God we talk about is the same God we see in Job, or with Isaiah in the Temple, or Moses on Mount Horeb, on the mount of transfiguration, the same God who emptied Himself and made Himself nothing, taking our form then going to the cross and suffered excruciatingly that we might be reconciled with Him.

And we have the audacity to say which parts of this God we will accept and which we can discard.

We are too fixated on our own needs and wants, we want God on our terms not His, we see the church as ours to do with as we wish even as we profess that it's His, we are so focussed on trying to maintain what we are familiar with that we are failing to see where the Lord, whose church it is anyway, is calling us to.

I have also been reading in Deuteronomy where Moses reminds the people that they rebelled against God after the spies had returned with reports of the bounty in the promised land. The people did not trust the God who delivered them with His mighty power from their bondage, who lead them by fire and by cloud, and so they were condemned to wander in the wilderness until that generation died out.

Can we learn from those stories? Are we in danger of fearing to move in new directions? Do we have a vision of who this God is that calls us to follow?

We seem to want to reverse the call and call on God to follow where we want to lead. We would never admit to that because we don't see we are doing it. We feel we must preserve the church at all costs – well at least the church we know.

We don't have to save the church. Jesus Himself said that the church would continue and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. But He didn't say that any one part of it wouldn't fail or pass away. Church history has many examples of that. We are in real danger of fading away if our preoccupation is on ourselves and not on Jesus who needs to be at the centre of who we are as a people of God.

Of course Jesus is in the midst of His people, of course He dwells by His Spirit within the hearts of those who call Him Lord, but are we assuming that He is in fact leading us when we seem intent on wanting to go our own way. Do we really take the time to settle to listen for His voice?

I know some do and sadly they're often thought to be odd.

Do we, in our church councils, schedule time to wait quietly and prayerfully on God for His directions and not our own. In an ongoing survey I have found most elders say that the bulk of their time is spent on day to day matters and very little in quietly listening for God or seeking His mission in our place.

If God calls us to a task He will provide what is required. If we are struggling, especially financially, the question is not how do we increase our income or cut our expenses, it's, what is God trying to get through to us. God knows that the best way to catch a Presbyterian's attention is through the wallet!

We have huge challenges facing us and ones not just related to us being God's people in this place, but with the matters that are affecting the life of this nation and its communities. The latest census figures are a call to us. Increasingly we are finding ourselves on the margins of society even though our minds are inclined to think we are still at the centre. Clearly people in this land are on a spiritual quest. The sad thing is that the faith we are called to proclaim is not one that many would even think about exploring. In many cases we are the obstacle in their quest. I think it is a good thing for us to be on the margins of society. There is a freedom there. We can be a prophetic people more easily.

So as I travel about the Synod what do I see.

I see wonderful, committed people working very hard, I do see wonderful things happening, innovative ideas, new expressions of being God's people taking shape.

I also see people running out of energy, I see groups, that like me, are aging, I see groups that are finding themselves lacking resources especially people resources.

I don't see large numerical growth but that concerns me less than wishing to see us all, and here I certainly include myself, growing more in the likeness of Jesus, more dependent on Him, less self-reliant and more Jesus reliant, less frantic activity and more waiting on God. In short less the Martha and more the Mary, less the impetuous Peter and more the John, the disciple Jesus loved.

I am naïve enough to believe that as our focus is more on Jesus and less on ourselves then we will find He gives the energy to do what He asks of us, not what we, or others, expect of us. As we are prepared to die to ourselves that we may live more for Him, then we will be far from being a dying institution that the world has already written off, to one of dynamic God filled people such as we can see in the early church and throughout history, including our own Presbyterian family.

I'm looking and praying that we will be a transformed people.

It is a privilege to be among you and I thank you for the opportunity to have been Moderator this past year. May God bless us all.

Bruce Fraser
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