

Feb 4, 2018 Homily for 5th Sunday of Year B, by Fr. Christopher Wyvill at the Abbey on Oblate Sunday.

The Book of Job is about a man who had everything one could want on this earth: wife and family of sons and daughters, possessions, good health, and honorable reputation. God allowed Satan to test him by taking everything away except his very life.

At the start when his children died and his flocks were stolen Job refused to curse God in spite of his losses. He accepted it and spoke those memorable words of submission: "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" That spirit seems to have left him as the afflictions continued and his three friends gave him no comfort, only blamed for what was happening to him.

What we heard in the first reading from Job was a description of a man deeply depressed. He lamented: "Is not a man's life on earth a drudgery? Are not his days those of hirelings?... So I have been assigned months of misery, and troubled nights have been allotted to me. ... My days ... come to an end without hope."

What do we do when we experience even a small portion of what Job suffered? I was recently talking with a couple whose daughter died after a long battle with cancer several years ago. She was in her thirties. They had prayed intensely for her healing and recovery, joined by family and friends. When she died, they became angry with God, to the point of stopping going to the sacraments. It took years before they began accepting God's sovereignty over the gift of a life he had created and whom he called home. They are finally returning to going to church and receiving the sacraments. I think we can all understand how hard it is to see how an early is the will of a loving, compassionate God.

In today's gospel from Mark we heard that Jesus healed many of the sick that were brought to him. That means he did not heal all of them. There is mystery here. Why is this person healed and not that one? God's ways are not our ways. Evoking Jeremiah's imagery from the pottery, St. Paul poses someone questioning God: "Why did you make me like this?" Paul's retort is: "Who are you to answer God back? ... Does not the potter have the right to make from the same lump of clay one vessel for a lofty purpose and another for a humble one?"

If you have ever been to Lourdes where Mary appeared to Bernadette more than 150 years ago, you will have seen the procession of the sick every afternoon to the underground church for adoration. The long line of the sick with their nurses and their aides followed by a group of doctors is very moving to see. The doctors are there to witness and verify any miracles that take place during that devotion.

The actual number of miracles at Lourdes verified by doctors is very small considering the millions of people who have made pilgrimage to the Shrine for so long a time. I am sure there are thousands of other miracles that only the recipients know. A friend of mine who was childless and praying for pregnancy while on pilgrimage there felt a jolt of heat go through her body as she was praying. Within a couple of years she had given birth to two beautiful daughters. A skeptic does not have to believe it. My friend knows beyond doubt it was Mary obtaining her that favor.

I have a cousin who was a very devout Catholic, happily married, rearing a large family. One daughter Barbara, a gifted 16 year old, was killed in an accident caused by a drunken driver. Though my cousin questioned and wrestled mightily with God in her grief, she never stopped the full practice of her Catholic faith.

The author of the Book of Wisdom tries to ease the pain of such losses by finding a reason why God lets tragedies like an early death happen. “She (applying to my cousin) who pleased God was loved; she who lived among sinners was transported – snatched away, lest wickedness pervert her mind or deceit beguile her soul. For the witchery of paltry things obscures what is right and the whirl of desire transforms the innocent mind. Having become perfect in a short while ... her soul was pleasing to the Lord. Therefore he sped her out of the midst of wickedness.”

My same cousin was challenged again when her teenaged son was found to have bone cancer in the leg. It was amputated up to the hip within a few days to prevent the disease’s spreading. He went through chemotherapy and radiation treatments. With her children and extended family she prayed for his healing with many Mass intentions and novenas. He recovered, married, fathered a loving family, had a professional career, and is now retired, in good health. The mystery deepens. Some prayers are answered, some are not.

Last Friday at vespers we had a reading from a conference by Bishop Joseph Gerry, former Abbot of St. Anselm’s Abbey in New Hampshire. The bishop uses the story of Job to emphasize the point he wants to make. In the story God does not try to justify why he let Job suffer so much. He simply asks Job what does he know about how the heavens were made, the sun and the stars set in place, the mountains and oceans formed, the winds and tides and the behemoths of the deep that roam the seas.

Job ends his arguing and protesting, admitting: “I know that you (God) can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me.” He concludes: “I had heard of you (God) by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you.... I repent.”

Bishop Gerry writes that in the face of life's tests, disappointments and grievings we have to adopt an attitude that involves believing God is a loving father who disciplines, corrects and tests us who are his children by adoption. "The only viable attitude" the bishop wrote is to stand in God's presence "in awe and reverence which still carries with it all the questions, but also all the resignation and acceptance that summed up Christ's 'hour'." "Father, not my will but thine be done."

May God give us the grace to bear all life's crosses with total trust in the enduring love for us that he revealed in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ to be our Savior. To the Father who sent him, Jesus who willing came, and their Spirit poured into our hearts be praise, honor, glory, thanksgiving and our humble obedience now and forever. Amen.