

There's a wideness in God's mercy / like the wideness of the sea . . .
(from an old hymn)

Today's first reading (from the *Book of Job*) is a "theatrical" classic – staging a man's confusion over what he considers to be unmerited suffering – and how to handle it. In his own estimation he has been a perfect observer of God's laws. And yet – one after another he loses property, family, his own health – and sits destitute upon a pile of ashes.

And he wonders why! Well, the System within which he lives is divinely legal, based on reward and punishment. You do right; you prosper. You do wrong; you suffer. It's built around how you behave – so behave yourself. Its God is an Overseer within whose cabinet sits Satan himself – on the lookout for scofflaws. And Job, being law abiding to a fault, bothers Satan – so God allows him to test Job – to see how authentic he really is. [We don't really need Satan to do this; we do it to ourselves all the time.] And judging from all the suffering that befalls Job, Satan must have found out plenty of mischief. And so Job has gotten his "just" deserts. Anyway that's how Job's friends see it. In effect they explain his suffering thus: *You must have sinned – extremely. That's the only explanation our System – of God, Laws, Satan, Sanctions – will allow. Admit it.*

The plight of Job initially awakens our sympathy, since Job – as a storybook character – is designed to have always been as we have said a strict observer of the System's rules. So he has a case. He has a right to ask: what gives? And so he argues tenaciously on his own behalf through thirty-seven chapters, appealing to the System's highest tribunal. Which is where a truer God breaks in – not to answer Job's questions but to question Job about matters far beyond Job's behavioral record. About the nature of snow and rain, about wild animals in their dens, about frost as the breath of God, about how clouds pile up, their silver lining; asking Job where was he when God founded the earth, when God shut within doors the sea, showed the dawn its place, walked about on the bottom of the deep, tied the cords to the Pleiades. True God asks then what Job knows of the birth of mountain goats, the birth pangs of a deer, the hunger of young lions . . . In other words he takes Job on a tour of a universe way beyond the everydayness of Job's experience: opening up so much more to assess than "how meritorious he is."

In a word, the Voice of the Creator summons Job out of his egocentric concerns – for that's where Job has been living – thinking about himself, his security, how he measures up to recipes of behavior, me, me, me – my status, my record, my *self* in the eyes of a God made in my own image: judgmental. After this tour Job has so much more to think about than himself. Job shuts up, stops whining; the time has come to *listen* to all that he was deaf to because of his egocentric preoccupations, his precious perfection.

Which is where today's Gospel reading comes in. Jesus is always ahead of himself – he sees Simon's mother-in-law (!) ill and goes to her immediately. He sees so many in need and gives them his attention, his caring . . . and the next day – resisting the clannishness of his disciples – he's off to nearby villages to heal, to care . . . ever reaching beyond himself out of care for this universe of Job's Creator. By the way, the *Book of Job* ends with Job recovering everything he lost – but now *seen* in a wonderfully different light.

Geoff Wood