

Pentecost 19: Job 23.1–9, 16–17 Psalm 22.1–15 Hebrews 4.12–16 Mark 10.17–31

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Got questions? – There is a story

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

I have always had a very strong faith. My mother thinks I am very blessed and I do indeed feel very blessed to have such a sense of the presence and love of God. But I have been deeply challenged twice in my life. One was when my father died of cancer about 12 years ago, which was closely followed by the break down of my first marriage. That time was absolute dark night of the soul stuff where God seemed completely absent. The second time was about 6 years ago when I went to the Philippines.

I was walking with our travel group through a Manila underground and I saw a little toddler lying on a piece of cardboard. I asked our guide where the child's parents were. She replied, "It doesn't have any" and hurriedly walked on. I caught up with her and said, "What do you mean – it doesn't have any?"

The guide went on to explain that the child had been abandoned. There is estimated to be 1.5 million street children in the Philippines. World wide, the figure is something like 100 million. Some of these children still have contact with their families. Many do not. For what ever reason these children have been have left to fend for themselves. As you can imagine these children are at enormous risk. Murder, consistent abuse and inhumane treatment are the 'norm'. They often resort to petty theft and prostitution for survival and are extremely vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

Little Alyssa Grace is one of the fortunate, lucky babies in the world – she has parents, family and friends that will care for her and protect her. In comparison with the Manila toddler she lives in a prosperous, safe, wealthy and relatively peaceful country.

Perhaps it was the comparison between the lives of children like Alyssa and the Manila toddler that shattered my faith. And it did shatter. Where was God?? How could a loving God allow such horror to happen? What

was it that made it such that I was fortunate enough to be born in Australia and that little baby drew the long straw? There was no rhyme or reason to it and it certainly did not equate with my idea of a just God. I got really angry with God and pretty much decided to walk out on faith of any type. I was ready to take up the atheist banner and embrace scientific materialism whole-heartedly. I spent most of the trip angry at God, not believing in God and feeling confused and lost.

Later in the trip I ended up in Bagiu cathedral, glancing about at the very catholic looking crucifixes about the place. I happened to have a bible with me, not sure why now, perhaps I was trying to find some answers, and I opened it up at psalm 22 and read “My God, My God why have you forsaken me”.

There it was in black and white – God forsakes

There it was in black and white – Jesus last words on the cross. These were the last words Jesus cried out, Jesus who was so convinced of the love and providence of God. Jesus himself felt utterly forsaken by God, utterly abandoned by his loving father. Orphaned and suffering on the cross.

Job in today’s Old Testament reading feels forsaken by God. He looks and looks for God but cannot find him. He wants to find God and lay before him his side of the situation but where ever he looks God remains hidden. Backwards, forwards, left and right God is veiled and unseen.

One writer calls these types of experiences “questions without answers”. There are many reasoned theological arguments for the existence of suffering but somehow they never seem to quite satisfy, they never quite cut it, particularly when we or someone we love is in the depths of despair. That is one of the most annoying things about Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, - they keep giving him these trite answers to his despairing cries. They drown out his grief with a torrent of words – assumptions, conjectures, and reasoned arguments.

Yet side-by-side to these “questions without answers” is the mysterious fact of human altruism, of human goodness and our unimaginably vast complex finely tuned cosmos that gave rise to intelligent life in the first place that can ask such questions. Our world is neither purely good nor evil, but black, white and many shades of grey and we are the beings who can conceptualize and reason in the midst of the grey.

I don’t have any answers. What I do have is a story that I keep telling. It’s the story we all know. It is the story that actually changes the way we look at reality - the story of Jesus Christ.

That story is a lens by which those unanswered questions can be viewed and lived through. Jesus turns our view of reality on its head and challenges our assumptions about how things should be. Many people make the comment that they are not much interested in organized religion yet the same people will say that there is something about Jesus that is special. They don't know quite how but they sense it anyway. Jesus is different, so different and special that his followers ended up deciding he had come to them from another realm to show them the way, this new way of looking at reality. It is one of the things about him that makes following in his path so interesting, challenging and never dull.

The story today from Mark's gospel turns reality upside down. This story is actually one of the healing stories. The rich man runs up to Jesus, just as other countless other Jesus-pursuers have done through the Book of Mark. The scene is set for him to request and receive healing, and his running and kneeling show that his request is both urgent and sincere. But he is the one person in the entire book who rejects the healing offered to him.

“Jesus looking at him loved him”. Matthew and Luke leave this out but Mark, always spare with words takes the time to note that Jesus loves this man. He offers him healing. “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow me”.

What is the healing that this man needs? What he lacks is that he does not lack. This man is possessed – but only by his possessions. Jesus is offering to free him of his possession, to cure him of excess. But the rich man turns his back.

We are like the young man - surrounded by excess, we are consumed by excess. We people in Australia, in comparison with most of the people in the world, live in a land and a time of abundance and plenty. Most people in the world experience hunger and times of fasting. We live in a place where food and water are on tap twenty-four hours a day. And not just fruit, vegetables, meat and rice - 30 types of savoury biscuits, 100 types of chocolate, 10 brands of smoked salmon. Aisle after aisle of packaged food – 99% of it completely unnecessary to our existence. And then there is the VCR, the DVD, a PC and a CD and a BMW and an RV (and truly blessed are you if you do not know what any of those mean!).

Our prison is our materialism, our things, our stuff.

The prison of the little child in Manila is her abject poverty.

Are you getting a picture of imbalance here?

What the little child needs is family, food, water, shelter, education and half a bloody chance. What we need is to be unencumbered by the weight of our possessions, so we can be free to follow the Lord of life.

The little child in Manila and we are connected. We are connected in our common humanity and need. We are connected because we all rely on the one beautiful planet for our sustenance and livelihood. We are connected because we have one lord who is creator and sustainer of all. We are connected because what we do here in wealthy Australia has an impact on people in far away countries and on the very atmosphere of earth.

The letter to the Hebrews we heard states that we have a 'great high priest' Jesus Christ who understands what it is like to be human, who can sympathize with our weaknesses, our suffering, our mistakes, our questions. What finally enabled me to turn the corner in my crisis of faith was the revelation in Bagiu cathedral that God in Jesus Christ is with us in our suffering – not sitting around on some distant cloud, but with us, showing us the way.

It is the way of truth, of life, of hope, of forgiveness and reconciliation. That is the story we tell. It is the story that little Alyssa Grace will be welcomed into today. She, like all of us, will have her part to play in the story. And God will be with her, suffering with her in those moments of despair and pain, rejoicing with her in her moments of triumph, urging her to love others and to give freely and generously, helping her to see the path that leads fullness of life for all – herself, the Manila baby and the earth.

Today we celebrate the two great Christian sacraments – baptism and Holy Communion. Both of them tell the story. What will we hear?

