

# Homily for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 7, 2021

## Three Philosophies of Life

The Book of Job. That's where our First Reading is taken from. It is part of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, made up of seven books: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Book of Wisdom, Sirach, and Job. They teach important lessons about the meaning of life and give practical advice on how to live it well.

Back in 1989 Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College and a Catholic author, wrote a book entitled *Three Philosophies of Life*. I recommend it. Kreeft begins the book with this sentence: "I've been a philosopher for all my adult life and the three most profound books of philosophy that I have ever read are Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs."

"There are ultimately only three philosophies of life," says Kreeft, and each one is represented by one of these books:

1. Life as vanity is Ecclesiastes
2. Life as suffering is Job
3. Life as love is the Song of Songs

Ecclesiastes is a book for the modern person. At its core is the question: Does my existence here have any meaning? But it goes further and asks: Suppose it has none at all? If life ultimately has no meaning then "*all is vanity*" (1:2).

By vanity the author does not mean excessive pride in one's appearance – as in a “vanity mirror” – rather he means all is in vain: all is futile.

When modern people are asked the question: What is the *summum bonum*, the greatest good, the final end, the ultimate purpose of life? the answer they generally give is ... no answer. They do not know why they exist, what they are here for?

And having no grasp of any ultimate purpose to life, they preoccupy themselves with various subjective goals. These goals may be quite fine in themselves but they are, like us, passing. And even if we come to possess that for which we strive, we cannot overcome a sense of its transience – that it is slowly slipping from our grip like water between our fingers – and that it is not enough. For no short-term purpose can compensate for long-range purposelessness.

If there is no real meaning to life, then everything we do is circumscribed by its mere subjectivity and the defining reality of death. Or as Ecclesiastes puts it: “*Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind*” (2:14).

Now we come to the Book of Job and its great meditation on the problem of suffering. Throughout the book we see Job and his friends wrestling with the question of why an all-powerful and just God would let such horrible sufferings happen to Job?

The answer given by his friends is that the bad things that have occurred must indicate that Job is not a good person and is deserving of punishment. But Job is good, and God Himself acknowledges this at the beginning of the book.

Job then briefly flirts with the idea that maybe it is God who is not good? He imagines dragging God into court to present his case. This is the modern approach to the problem of evil. We put God in the dock and make ourselves His judge. But Job recoils from the idea, realizing that God is the Judge, not he. *“Though I think myself right, His mouth may condemn me; though I count myself innocent, it may declare me a hypocrite”* (9:20). Job resigns himself to the fact that suffering in this life is inevitable and in light of God’s silence, inexplicable.

Finally, God intervenes, speaking out of a whirlwind, asking Job a series of rhetorical questions that demonstrate the infinite gulf that exists between God and His creatures. *““Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding”* (38:4). Overwhelmed and humbled by the encounter, Job acknowledges his error in questioning God. But Job has learnt something.

God revealed that the wisdom of His providential designs far exceeds human understanding. That the mystery of suffering lies within a greater mystery, the mystery of God.

Yet, while Job’s sufferings were terrible, he never gave up on God. He never lost his faith. In this sense his sufferings proved to be purifying,

even enlightening: giving him eyes to see God more humbly and authentically. So, while Job never did discover the answer to his question, he did discover something else: The God Who Is. The One in whom our lives find meaning and purpose.

And this brings us to the Song of Songs. It is the only book in the Bible that never once mentions God. The book is a love poem or collection of love poems; dramatizing the passion between a lover and his beloved.

Yet, God is in the book, hidden in plain view, by analogy. For human love and attraction are gifts of God oriented toward the marriage covenant. And the marriage covenant itself is an image of the covenantal love that God has for His people.

We see this in Isaiah, where the prophet declares, *“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you”* (62:5b). And in Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where after quoting Genesis, *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”* he immediately adds, *“This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church”* (5:31-32).

So, the Song of Songs is a “double love story, vertical and horizontal, divine and human.” That is why it is a scriptural favourite for many saints and mystics (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote at least 86 homilies on this book).

The Song of Songs is the answer to the question of Ecclesiastes and to the quest of Job.

Through it we finally reach the point where we understand God as Lover and ourselves as His beloved. And divine love is the one thing in this life that is stronger than death. It contains eternity within itself.

And it is out of this divine love for us that God sent His Son into the world. But when Perfect Love meets an imperfect and sinful world it embraces a cross. Yet true love is willing to sacrifice itself, to suffer, for the beloved. For its ultimate goal is the perfection, the consummation, of that love in the eternal wedding banquet that we call heaven.