

**“Three Questions for God” a sermon preached for Pentecost 20 by
Kerry Enright on 11 October 2015 based on Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Hebrews 4:12-16 and
Mark 10:17-31**

Today we are ordaining three elders, inducting four elders and ordaining and inducting a deacon.

Since our Annual Meeting, I have been thinking about these people. I have been thinking about what I pray for them.

My prayer is this – that their faith may be a transforming faith, and their faith may be an enduring faith.

Neither can be taken for granted.

Society seems so determined to tame difference that people whose lives are directed other than by society itself find it hard to breathe.

There is a strong push to conform, not to stand out, not to look other than to the known and trusted.

It can be hard to hold to a transforming God, a God who changes us, our church, our world. Yet it is fundamental.

And an enduring faith – nearly forty years ago, I was ordained and inducted and with many others knelt at the front of the church.

I wonder whether they are still involved. We cannot take it for granted.

What do our texts offer us for such a faith?

They offer us questions.

Job is full of questions. The writer of Hebrews says that scripture asks questions, like a two edged sword. If we had heard the psalm for the day, Psalm 22, we would have heard the soul-breaking cry – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And the gospel today, well, it’s full of questions of Jesus and his in reply.

I suggest that to have a life -long and life-changing faith, we need to ask questions, and we need to ask questions of God.

And I suggest three are core: Who are you? Where are you? Can I join you?

Who are you?

Of course, God has been revealed to us so do we need to ask the question?

We believe God is like Jesus. That Jesus is the face of God. And that the stories of the people of Israel, the stories of Jesus, the stories of the early church, that these are stories of God. And since then we have had the stories of the church, of followers through the ages. Yes, these reveal who God is for us.

Yet they only take us so far. Knowledge of the story does not give us faith.

For God is perpetually present. Here and now, not just there and then. Not done and dusted. Not worked out. Not packaged or boxed.

God is surprising, untameable, never fully known.

At the time of my parents 50th wedding anniversary my mother said – we have been married for fifty years and yet sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I wonder who is this man. I don't really know him. As it is true of our most intimate human relationships, it is certainly true of our relationship with God. Mercy is fresh each morning. Grace is new each day.

The first formal prayer in worship asks this question of God – who are you? It's called the prayer of praise or adoration.

I cherish that prayer and the preparation of that prayer. Week by week I am forced to ask – who is God for us this week, this particular community, this particular moment.

The questioning can be prompted by little things. Here is a prayer I wrote on Stewart Island last week prompted by the experience of a door opening and closing very well –

A door swings easily on the hinge, gently, effortlessly. No rubbing, no forcing, no gap. It opens and closes perfectly, an exceptional fit. So it is entering your presence, dear God, for your son Jesus Christ is the door you selected, and crafted and planed, testing his strength, revealing his grain.

Who are you? That question affirms that our God is not tameable, manageable or convenient.

And the question - where are you?

It was Job's question.

Here he was, on his ash heap, still miserable, still surrounded by well-meaning irritating friends. One of those friends has just giving Job a lecture and now it's his turn to respond. Is it with thundering indignation or exhausted lament? He certainly seems ambivalent.

On the one hand, he complains about God's oppressive presence. Job cannot escape God.

"His hand is heavy despite my groaning."

Then he cannot find God.

"O that I knew where I might find him; that I might come even to his dwelling! If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him."

Job thinks he has done all that is necessary to find God.

"My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside." Despite Job's faithfulness, still he asks the question – where are you?

One writer highlights what kind of person and what kind of God we have. "Job is not a tame man seeking a tame God. He's a God-haunted man pursuing the passion of his life, only to crash again and again *and again* into mystery. His is religion at its wildest — a journey towards the Presence that is Absence, the Safety that is Terror, the Knowing that is always, in this life, an Unknowing."

Job's story is an unresolved dialogue between the Israelite wisdom tradition, and the realities of faith in a messy world. The wisdom tradition holds that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

When his life falls apart, Job has to wrestle with this wisdom. This wisdom presented by his pious friends. Their faith does not work for him. He must ask questions, and his questions save him.

Where are you in our everyday? Where are you in our work? Where are you at work?
Where are you at school? Where are you in this city, in this church?

A generalised belief God is everywhere is not enough. It is one thing to know God generally; it is another to know God personally, in a process of questioning.

Where is God for you this week, today, in what you are experiencing now?

And the third question

Can I join you? Can I join you where you are?

Dare we ask it?

It's the question asked of Jesus today. To which the answer was – "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." And when he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The kingdom of God is where God is.

Every attempt at softening this call has failed. In days gone by, scholars and I might have suggested the eye of a needle is a door in the city wall that you have to bend to go through, but that theory has been discounted.

There is no way to soften the blow.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

And we must hear the answer for ourselves, however hard it is, even if it means letting money go, even if it means letting family values go.

I leave you with three questions for God – Who are you? Where are you? Can I join you?