

10 October 2021

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Hebrews 4: 12-16

Mark 10:17-31

The vending machine stood quietly humming in the corner. It was located in the foyer of the university library, a vast storehouse of all worldly knowledge. It was a busy location, and the vending machine was popular with many who passed through on their way to advance their understanding of the world. Many others though seemed oblivious to its presence. Inside the machine, behind the glass and brightly illuminated by the fluorescent tubes, was such an array of good treats that anyone passing by was sure to salivate in anticipation. Those who had regularly visited the library for some time were under the belief that the vending machine had been there as long as the library had stood, since the foundation of the university, humming away, never out of stock of the delicious things on offer.

Some of the regulars spoke of a mysterious phenomenon: the machine seemed to randomly just offer up things for free. They would be walking through the foyer and would be surprised to hear a clunk or rustle come from the machine just as they passed, and they'd go to the machine and lift the flap to find that something had been dispensed into the machine's delivery box. And the even more astonishing thing was it always dispensed what you most wanted: if you walked past the machine feeling thirsty, it would dispense a drink; if you were hungry, it would deliver a scrumptious pie; if your nose was running, there you'd find a packet of tissues; if your blood sugars were getting dangerously low, it would be sweets. These regulars were convinced of this wonder.

But these regulars also didn't take it for granted. They would often make the effort to put coins in the slot; and many of them would do it just when they were passing even if they didn't need anything right then, and without keeping any kind of running calculation of payment made relative to value received. They were just grateful for the amazing gifts that kept on being dispensed by the machine, and out of that gratitude tried to make some kind of payment.

There were other regulars, however, who had become hard and worldly-wise. These folk started to scoff about the machine's gifts. "You certainly can't rely on that machine," they'd say. "It can't go on forever like this; someone will find out and will fix it to work like a regular machine." So they started bringing their own snacks and treats; and if the machine happened to dispense something as they walked past, they'd just walk on and leave it there in preference for what they'd supplied themselves.

However, among those who still depended on the machine, some became confused about how it all worked. In their view, the machine only dispensed good things because the right money was being paid, the right number of coins in the correct denominations, each time. These people worked hard to ensure that they paid just the right amount, making careful calculations about what was required, and doing odd-jobs to ensure that they had to hand what seemed to be needed.

One chap was quite smug about the whole thing. You see, ever since his youth he'd proven very able at amassing plenty of coins in all the relevant denominations. He had also received masses and masses of treats from the machine, over time accumulating a great store of items received. He believed that he would always have all the coin necessary to ensure that he would never face need ever again: he had enough coin – and prospects beyond – to mean that the machine would dispense what he needed for the rest of his life.

But he needed to be sure; he needed to be sure that he could rely on the machine continuing to work in the expected way.

So one day he went up to the machine and picked up the phone on the side of the machine – the line one would use to report any issues with the machine. He was connected to head-office, and he explained his question. There was a brief conversation, and then he quietly and bitterly walked away leaving the receiver hanging on its curly cord. I understand that head office told him that he did not in fact have enough and could not ever have enough, because he was looking at it all wrong. There was apparently a fundamental problem: he was focussed on what *he had*; when he should have been focussed on the nature of the machine. The

proposal that he should give away what he already had received from the machine over the years just did not compute for him, and called into question what he regarded as the only source of his future security. He went away bitter and resentful.

I mentioned that some were confused because they thought the machine only dispensed good things because the right money was being paid. Well, the confusion grew. If someone was seen with a load of treats, it was assumed that they had made the right investment. These were seen as good people, who had clearly paid the right price for everything, and received what they were due.

And so, by logical extension (so it was thought), those who were looking a bit sorry because they didn't have what they wanted were accused of short-changing the machine. "You haven't got anything because you didn't pay the right amount in the right way," folks would say.

For one poor chap this became a major issue, because for weeks he'd gotten nothing from the machine, and yet he'd put everything he had into it. Friends gathered around and accused him of non-payment: that was the obvious conclusion to draw. He, however, roundly rejected the accusation. In his view, the machine must be at fault. It was the only logical explanation: he knew he had paid-up consistently ... and ultimately had paid *everything*. If nothing was forthcoming from the machine as a result, then the machine must be broken or offline; there was no two ways about it.

For quite some time this fellow could be seen on the phone, trying to reach the vending machine company head office to demand an explanation, listening dejectedly as it rang and rang and rang without answer.

My story is of course fictional. I strongly suspect you figured that out; but it might be a worthy exercise to reflect back on what it was that tipped you off to it being a fiction.

My made-up story is an attempt to encapsulate something of the message of today's readings. My story is an allegory, in which each of the key features stands for someone or something about what we find in the readings. I won't spell it all out for you: I invite you to do your own thinking and reflecting in the days to come, based on the clues I'll now provide.

The story's vending machine is God. God knows what we truly need and is a generous giver, giving beyond what we deserve or can ever repay him for.

The library users are various types of humankind, those of true faith, and those whose faith and understanding of the ways of God has gone a bit wonky – as addressed in today's readings.

The coins used in the machine are coins of obedience.

Those of the library users who don't take the machine for granted are like the faithful who, in faith and gratitude for God's grace, respond with lives of whatever obedience they can muster.

The scoffers are like those who sit in the background of today's passage from Hebrews. If we look at chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews, we find the writer quoting from Psalm 95: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." In Psalm 95 this phrase leads into a recital of the way the Israelites behaved in the wilderness during the exodus: they failed to trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God who had done amazing good things, bringing them out of slavery and providing for them in the desert. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews uses this background story and the repetition of the phrase to challenge his audience to not be like the ancient Israelites; not to harden their hearts, but to continue to trust in the goodness of God.

Those confused about how this vending machine works are like those who believe that God only gives good things if they are obedient enough.

The smug fellow is of course the wealthy man we encounter in Mark 10. His obedience has, he says, been exemplary. But his faith lies, not in the goodness of God, but in his own ability and success. He assumes that his wealth is a sign of God's pleasure; but Jesus challenges him to give it all up, to put God first, and to place his reliance on the grace and goodness of God. It is salutary that of the commandments Jesus lists for the man to evaluate himself against, Jesus omits the ones that relate to placing God first. Idolatry is the replacement of worship of God, Creator and good giver, with worship of someone or something else. The challenge to the man to give away his wealth is to sharply direct the man's attention to consider where he places his ultimate trust: is it in God, or is it in the things he has accumulated? Life in the age to come, the age in which God's kingdom is fully realised on earth as in heaven, depends not on what we have for ourselves but on putting God first.

The extension of the belief that God only gives good things if we are obedient enough is the view that those who possess much and seem to be blessed have it due to their obedience. And the corollary to that is the belief that lack of blessings – whether that be lack of wealth, or unanswered prayer, or illness or misfortune – must be the result of insufficient obedience.

And the poor chap at the end of my allegory is Job. He is accused of lacking in obedience – that is the essence of the speeches of those who have come to be referred to as “Job's comforters”. In response to the lengthy speeches of these three men, Job asserts over and over again that he has in fact been obedient. Job shares with these men the view of how things are supposed to work; but whereas his comforters point the finger at Job, Job points the finger at some breakdown on God's side of the equation.

At the beginning of the book of Job (a story which is actually presented almost entirely as poetry, rather than prose), we find that the whole story is based around testing the assumption that Job's exemplary behaviour is driven only by his expectation that he will continue to receive good things from God – take away the good things and let's see if Job continues to be a model citizen and worshipper.

And in today's reading from the book of Job, we've reached the point in the story in which Job finds himself unable to reach God as he tries to get an explanation for the apparent breakdown in the expected system.

While we may not hold quite the same view as Job about how things work, I think many of us can identify with feelings of helplessness, worry, anxiety and uncertainty in the face of woe and calamity; and there are times when God seems remote, unanswering and, we may feel, uncaring.

The book of Job is a caution against resorting to easy answers, the sorts of platitudes that we are so quick to trot out.

Within the book of Job we find no ultimate answer for when bad things happen to good people. Hebrews points us in the direction of answers, in two parts.

First, today's reading introduces the idea of Jesus as the great high priest. The answer to the apparently remote God of Job is found in Jesus, the one sent from the very heart of God to dwell among us; the one who suffered all the worst of what humankind has to endure; the one who now dwells at the right hand of God the Father – at the throne of grace – and pleads our case.

And second, the whole of Hebrews is founded on the understanding that this same Jesus not only suffered, but suffered *for us*. Hebrews 2:9 invites us to “see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” Tom Wright puts it this way:

It isn't, then, that Jesus offers an abstract of intellectual answer to Job's problem. Jesus, we might say, had to *become* Job, suffering unjustly at the hands of the powers, 'in order that by God's grace he might taste death for everyone.'¹

¹ Wright, *Twelve*, p.111

My story was fictional. I invited you to think about what it was that tipped you off to it being a fiction. And I wonder if perhaps it was because my vending machine didn't operate in the way we expect: the vending machines we know don't routinely give something for nothing.

But herein lies the point and the challenge for us. In order to make my allegory describe the nature of God, I had to invent a vending machine that does not operate like a real vending machine. Why is it then that we do the reverse: why is it that we seem to insist on treating God as if he is some kind of vending machine?

Sources:

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