

Happily ever after?

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Hebrews 7:23-28

The American actor and film director Orson Welles once said, "If you want a happy ending, it just depends where you close the book!"

In a lovely exchange in Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the young Cecily is speaking to her governess:

Cecily: Did you really (write a novel) Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.

Miss Prism: The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

That certainly fits the Book of Job. As this challenging book comes to an end, most scholars believe that the Epilogue was added by a different author from the main book. The book originally ended with Job in complete humility and faith in God at the end of verse six. The last verses seem to be a tidying up of the story. They're unnecessary really as the main thing Job wanted was the restoration of his friendship with God. The last verse, "And Job died, old and full of days" might as well have ended: "...and they all lived happily ever after..." His family returned, or replenished, a large fortune is built up, and an abundance of sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys, without which no happy ending is possible. "...and they all lived happily ever after..."

It's not the only amended ending of a book in the Bible. The editors who came to the end of Mark's Gospel were equally dissatisfied with how he'd finished his account of the life of Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, on the first Easter morning, the stone is rolled away from the tomb, there's a vision of an angel telling the women that Jesus has risen from the dead and that they should go and tell the disciples. Then everyone runs off full of trembling and astonishment, not saying anything to anyone because everyone was afraid. I can imagine the New Testament editors saying, "Oh, this won't do, so they tacked on a few verses to tie up the loose ends, possibly borrowed from other gospels, with Jesus appearing, speaking, sending people out and then ascending to heaven to sit at God's right hand, encouraging everyone to go out and preach the gospel and perform miracles. "...and they all lived happily ever after..."

There is nothing wrong with wanting everything to end happily and well – in books, or films, or TV programmes. Nobody likes being left with a cliff-hanger, or things unresolved. When the words, 'The End', appear, and the final credits run and the music soars to a climax, you want to go out into the world cheerful and satisfied.

Except, very often, life is not like that. I wonder if there ever are endings, happy or otherwise, because the experience we have to date is that things go on. Most stories in life do not end with, "...and they all lived happily ever after..." they go on. They reach a point that says, "...to be continued..."

When people, or situations, fall off the end of a story, others pop up to take the story on, in new directions, reaching some conclusions, before moving on to the next thing. It might not be neat, but it's certainly real.

The story of Job, and it could also be argued the story of the whole Bible, is not to write humanity's book about God. It is to encounter God's book about humanity. There are stories about God creating spaces and places for humanity; but the real point, which is endlessly absorbing, is to consider if humanity can create spaces and places for God in life?

The Austria-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once rhetorically asked: What is your aim in philosophy? He replied: to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. The fly is trapped in the bottle. It searches for a way out. Repeatedly it bangs its head against the glass until at last, exhausted, it dies. Had it been gifted with the power of reasoning it would have saved itself despair and death. If there is a way in there is a way out. The one thing the fly forgets to do is to look up. Insight is the capacity to see the familiar things from an unfamiliar perspective. If we are to understand the book of Job, or the Bible, maybe we should invert what we see to ask not about our faith in God, but about God's faith in us.¹

We look for happily ever after in so many ways, whereas God in the Bible, and in life, is looking for a relationship that grows and develops; that gives and takes; that adapts and deepens. We look to tie up all the ends neatly, and come to a conclusion, whereas God prefers things more open-ended. God asks throughout the Bible through prophets and psalms, books of wisdom,

gospels and letters this great question: Given the love and blessings, rescues and redemptions...bestowed on humanity, where is humanity's answering response?ⁱⁱ

The original ending of the book of Job for some ends a little miserably, with Job saying he's asked questions for answers he probably would never understand, and in a moment of profound self-awareness, repenting in dust and ashes, comes to accept that what he, Job, needs, was not finite answers to infinite, and endless, questions; but a relationship that involves hearing and seeing and wondering and accepting. Others may talk *about* God. What we find here is Job talking *to* God.

And as they talk, as they relate to one another, there is, to my mind, a strong sense of a story continuing, a journey going onwards, which will be filled with the same hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares, hurts and healings, endings and beginnings.

Job never gets an answer to his questions about why suffering, or why evil in a world that is supposed to be good. What Job gets is God. "I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee." Instead of getting every answer to every question, Job gets God, and the understanding that God will journey onward with Job. Discovering, exploring, wondering, resolving, breathing, living, believing.

Like eager children, we don't want the stories to end, but to hear more, and engage more, not simply for the sake of the story, but for the joy of the presence of the story-teller.

In his Lord of the Rings trilogy, two of Tolkein's characters, weary and frightened and philosophical wonder about their place in the story of life: "Don't the great tales never end?" Asks Sam. "No, they never end as tales," said Frodo. "But the people in them come and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later – or sooner."ⁱⁱⁱ And their quest continued and continued to continue.

As Covid comes and goes; as Brexit looms large and recedes; as economic worries ebb and flow; as history stops and starts; as day follows night; as Winter follows Autumn; as Spring follows Winter; so there is never quite a final 'happily ever after'. Because the story goes on as we grow and adapt and respond and engage and learn and believe.

Though Job pauses for a while in his wrestling with God, and reflects on all that he has learned, and not learned, he draws breath, assumes some humility, but retains his steady grip on his faith and his God. In Job, the sequel, Job would, I believe, continue to call God out of hiding in heaven to confront unjust suffering on earth. I believe Job will get up from the ash heap, and continue to move on in his life, and with his God, asking and challenging and wondering. There are no easy answers to hard questions; there are rarely 'happy ever after' endings in the story of life. But there is for Job, and I believe for us, the calling with God to transform the suffering in the world where we can; and confront the injustices in life wherever we meet them; and to overcome, and move on, until we need to overcome again. Never alone, but with each other, and with God.

It might not be, 'happily ever after', but is always, 'to be continued' as the story of life, and the story of faith, unfolds some more.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World, p193

ⁱⁱ Ibid p197

ⁱⁱⁱ J R R Tolkein, The Two Towers