Where were you…?

Job 38:1-7, Mark 15:25-27, 33-34, 37-39

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There is something about the book of Job that won't leave you alone. You could say it is a bit like Marmite, you either don't like it and avoid it, or you are drawn to it, and can't have enough of it. Looking back on my years of preaching, I was quite surprised to find that though the Lectionary, in its three years repeating cycles, gives you six different Bible passages to choose from every Sunday, I have invariably chosen Job, when it came on the list rather than going for any of the other five possibilities. So, you see, I have a bit of a history with Job. But my record is nothing to compare with that of Gregory the Great, the 6th century Church Father, who wrote 35 books of sermons on Job, or that of John Calvin the 16th century reformer, who preached 159 sermons on the book of Job. Why is it that this ancient story so fascinate us? Why is it that it had found its way into the OT list of books in the first place, (when parts of it radically challenge one of the prevailing theological ideas of the OT)? What is it that made it part of the Christian Bible and right up to our own days regularly features among the prescribed Lectionary readings? What makes it of an enduring interest for theologians, historians, artists and philosophers alike?

Well, the book as it stands gives us the story of an ancient folk hero, Job, a wealthy, upright and God-fearing pagan patriarch, who falls prey to a heavenly test between God and the Satan by loosing all his children and property and is finally stricken down by the most horrific skin disease throwing him into deep depression. In spite of all this he maintains his faith in God, who finally appears to him and restores his fortunes: he regains his health, and wealth, his standing in his community, he finds satisfaction in a new family and eventually dies in a ripe old age. Looking at this rough outline it would be easy to conclude (as a lot of pre-modern Jewish and Christian interpreters have done over the centuries) that we are faced with a simple morality tale: patient, saintly endurance of undeserved suffering will have its reward, justice will prevail, all is well with God's world.

The only problem with this approach is that it is based on the introductory and the concluding prose narrative of the book and virtually ignores the majestic poetry set within the folk tale frame, and takes up some 39 out of the total of 42 chapters. In this dramatic poem we encounter a different Job. After the assurance of chapter 2 that, in all the calamities Job "did not utter one sinful word" (2:10) chapter 3 bursts on the scene with a questioning, complaining, cursing, sometimes even blaspheming Job, who rages against his unjust treatment and wants to die rather than put up with his meaningless suffering. *"Perish the day when I was born"*- he cries -"*and the night which said, 'A boy is conceived'* (3:3).

Of course, he doesn't know anything about the heavenly goings-on between God and the Satan, yet he is convinced that somehow it is all down to God, "*Why should the sufferer be born to see the light"… hedged about by God on every side?"*- he continues, echoing the sentiments of millions of humans down the ages, who endure every kind of pain and hurt in their daily living and find it difficult to reconcile their suffering with a loving, caring God. His big question of "Why?"is our question, it is the question of humankind. We are meaning-making creatures, and the more highly developed we get the more we seek valid answers to all our questions. Knowledge is power, and power can ensure that we remain in control. And perhaps this is one of the major reasons why Job is such a widely regarded figure in our Bible and outside it. His question of 'why' bridges the gap between Adam and Eve's question in the creation story of why is there a forbidden tree and Jesus' question of agony on the cross 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Over the course of the 39 chapters, the author of this amazing poem takes the reader through a considerable journey. In Job's protestations and with the help of his three friends different answers are being tried out, and discarded. The most popular, which is still alive and well in our own day, is that human suffering is rightful punishment for human sin and the way out of it is by repentance. But this doesn't satisfy our ancient poet, for the story clearly states more than once that Job is not a sinner, but an exemplary, righteous character. And it doesn't satisfy us either, because it does not explain the suffering of innocent children, or adults for that matter, or victims of war, natural disasters, genetic abberrations etc.

The other explanation is that suffering is a test of faith, which is again an ancient as well, as a modern religious answer to the question. On this account Job comes through with flying colours, he holds on to his integrity, he maintains his faith in God, yet it doesn't ease his pain, or satisfy his mind. And in any case, this is the most troubling aspect of the Job story. Do we, can we really believe in a God, who plays with human lives the way it is portrayed in the introduction to the book of Job? Or, - as I suggested in another sermon – can we take it that it is merely a picturesque way of saying that human suffering is not outside the divine jurisdiction?

A third rational possibility is that suffering is given to us in order to teach us some valuable lessons about life, about ourselves and ultimately about God. In our experience, there is a lot to be said for this solution. We know that hardship can teach people about the value of community, for example. Some of you will remember how, even the worst days of war, acquire a certain glow with hindsight because the suffering opened people's eyes towards other people's suffering: there was more empathy, more willingness to help and share the resources than in peace time. Job goes through the same process. Once he is able to look outside his own

unjust, desperate situation, he realises that it's not just him. The more he looks around him, the more he sees the injustices and unfairness of all of life. The wicked prosper and the good often suffer. Tired of his friends useless arguments and despite their counsel that God would not come to his rescue, Job knows that only God could give him a satisfactory answer and calls upon God to come and explain the reasons behind his terrible misfortune.

But God is silent and is not to be found anywhere. Job is facing a predicament well-known to humans in general, believers as well as non-believers, when he says: "*How shall I find help within myself now that success has been put beyond my reach?"* (6:13) We know the feeling. Am I expected to do this all on my own? Can I find the resources in myself when life throws bad things at me for no good reason?

Archibald MacLeish, an American poet tried to work with this solution in his 1958 dramatic poem called J.B. It is a modern retelling of the Job story in 20th century America. J.B. is a wealthy and prosperous NY businessman with a devoted wife and five beautiful children. All goes well for him and he blesses God for his success. But then owing to a bet between a God-character and a Satan character, everything is taken away from him and he finds himself on the street lying in agony due a nuclear attack. In this version, J. B. remains placid and much happier to acknowledge his own guilt than finding fault with God. It is his wife, Sarah, who rages against the horror of losing her children one by one and having to witness her husband's suffering. J.B. too has his own comforters, but doesn't believe any of them and wants only God's explanation. He doesn't get it, instead he is offered his old life back, if he repents and promises to obey God, or he could commit suicide to spite the God who apparently 'abandoned' him. J.B. rejects both offers at which point his wife returns (having earlier gone off to take her own life). She summarizes the situtaion: *"I loved you. I couldn't help you any more. You wanted justice, but there was none, - only love. Blow on the coal of the heart… it is all the light now".* Job ascents and they go off together to build a new life. The clear message here is that human love triumphs over divine injustice.

But that's not what happens to the Biblical Job. He doesn't think he can do it on his own. He rejects the human solutions offered by his wife and by his so-called friends and by the skin of his teeth he clings to the idea of God and insists on God's personal explanation. And so, eventually God answers Job out of the tempest. But what an answer!

> *"Who is this who darkens counsel with words devoid of knowledge?*
> *Brace yourself and stand up like a man; I shall put questions to you,*
> *and you must answer.*
> *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations…?*

And the questioning goes on for 5 full chapters. There is no self-defence here, no attempt to explain anything, rather the questioned turns questioner and the mystery remains a mystery. Job doesn't learn the reasons for his own plight, but his eyes are opened to an amazing universe, of which he is not the centre. You would think that all this seemingly irrelevant information would make him even angrier, but the opposite happens. He calms down and curiously regains his inner peace. He even repents – something he had refused to do through all his struggles. But repentance here doesn't mean acknowledging sins, it means changing his mind about God. Job's second-hand knowledge of God becomes a life-changing first-hand experience. In it he learns that though humans can never know everything about God, the questioning and the searching is far more pleasing to God than the pious defences humans construct to keep their image of God intact.

The conclusion of the ancient author and that of the suffering Jesus on the cross is that even in the very absence of God, God is the answer. Not in an external, miraculous, interventionist way, but in the gift of faith and inner strength and reconciliation and yes, in the gift of human love, as the American play suggested. These are the precious gifts we may want to give thanks for as we come to the table of thanksgiving. Amen

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