

## Wisdom for Life: Wisdom for tough times

I'm sure you're familiar with the old adage about a glass filled to halfway with water. The optimists say it's half full, the pessimists insist it's half empty. In case you're wondering, I'm a glass half full person – not least because in our house a half-full glass generally means gin and tonic. But I once worked with someone who was so profoundly pessimistic that we used to joke that she didn't even have a glass (presumably that was why she was generally considered to be a bit of a "wet blanket".) It probably wasn't a very kind thing to say – in her deep-seated distrust of everyone and everything she needed love and support rather than banter and bad humour – but I'm afraid that at times the temptation to be unkind just got the better of us.

Temptation. Whether we are the sunniest optimist or the gloomiest pessimist we are all subject to temptations and trials, and – yes - suffering. For the first readers of James' letter the two were often synonymous. In the face of brutal persecution the temptation to abandon one's Christian faith was very real. But James is wise enough to recognise that this is not the only temptation facing followers of the Way of Jesus. We encounter trials and temptations, sorrows and suffering on a daily basis – if not our own personal issues, then indirectly as members of the human race.

So what wisdom can we find in Scripture – and especially in the letter of James – which can help us to think about these difficult issues?

First up, let me say that I do not believe that God puts trials, temptations and suffering in our way in order to "discipline" us or to teach us something. God is a loving parent who will use the events of our lives to help us to learn more about himself, our own selves, and other people, and to discover more of his loving purposes. (Gill spoke about this in her sermon this morning.) Anyway, speaking personally, I can easily find way enough temptation on my own account without God needing to add anything into the mix.

However, I do think that sometimes God will ask us to do things for him which will lead us into uncomfortable places. On reflection, he was probably inviting me to go against the grain and be more positive in my response to my former colleague. He's certainly asked me to take a step beyond where I feel comfortable in relation to other things he has called me to do. And each time I discover – again - that these uncomfortable places are also situations where we can grow in a way that we wouldn't do if we just stayed secure in our own

'comfort zones'. God loves us just as we are – and too much to leave us that way.

But whatever the trial or temptation, or even suffering, James is pretty clear that we should address it with patience, for endurance leads to blessing.

But what might this look like?

Firstly, we know that we are never alone. We have the assurance that God in Jesus knows what we are going through. He knows what it is to be tempted. He knows what it is to suffer. He didn't promise that life would be easy – but he did promise that by his Spirit he will be with us in everything we face. There's a particular passage in our Reflective worship liturgy which highlights this to me each time we hear it

For your love for us, compassionate and patient,  
which has carried us through our pain,  
wept beside us in our sin,  
and waited with us in our confusion.

The image of God sitting patiently alongside us, just waiting for us to notice he is there and to turn back to him – for comfort, for reassurance, for healing.

Sometimes we are aware of this.

Sometimes not.

Sometimes we feel as if we are in what has been called a "long dark night of the soul". A time when our very soul feels like a shrivelled desert within us. When we feel spiritually parched.

As the psalmist put it

O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps 63:1)

Times when it seems like our prayers bounce off the ceiling, unheard.

Maybe you know the poem Folk Tale by the Welsh Anglican priest and poet RS Thomas, which draws on the story of Rapunzel, the princess, trapped in a high

tower by an evil stepmother, who lets down her braided hair for her prince to climb up to rescue her. Even if you haven't heard the poem before, you'll maybe recognise the opening sentiment.

Prayers like gravel  
flung at the sky's  
window, hoping to attract  
the loved one's  
attention. But without  
visible plaits to let  
down for the believer  
to climb up,  
to what purpose open  
that far casement?  
I would have refrained long since  
but that peering once  
through my locked fingers  
I thought that I detected  
the movement of a curtain.

And as hope moves the poet's heart, so James encourages us to think of those who have travelled this faith journey before us, who have held on to what they know, or what they sense of God.

"I believe," cries the father desperate for Jesus to cure his son. "Help my unbelief."

Hold on to hope. Don't give up. Like Elijah in the cave, who found God not in the wind, or the fire, or the earthquake – all the places where God's people had traditionally encountered God – but in the still small voice, the sound of the silent whisper. He held on to hope in his dark place and finally emerged with an enlarged picture of God.

Or maybe take Job as our role model. Job, the righteous man who had everything – family, inheritance, health - then had it taken away, through no fault of his own. His so-called friends come to sympathise with him, but their comfort consists in telling him that all that has happened to him must be because he has turned away from God.

But Job knows this is not true, and eventually he takes all his despair directly to God. He pours out his pain and his anger, his hurt and his complaint.

And for a long time God is silent....

Job is one of many in the Old Testament who employs the ancient tradition of lament – or pouring out one’s pains and hurts, one’s confusion and – yes - one’s accusations against God. It’s a practice that can also be found in some psalms, and in among the prophecy books there is a whole book called Lamentations, five poems expressing the deep grief of the Israelites when they were taken into exile in Babylon.

It’s also experienced something of a revival over the past months as Christians have struggled to find words and theology to respond to the pandemic. Here’s one of those laments, written and presented by a Birmingham man, which as with so many psalms and poems within the book of Lamentations, finishes by recognising the goodness of God.

### **Lament**

When rumours of a virus turn to evening government updates...  
When headlines move to daily news of fresh infection growth rates...  
When schools are closed, then holidays postponed. Everyone is asking, “Who has been furloughed?”  
A slight change of plans, just wash your hands, “It’s like the flu, remember?”  
Let’s stay at home, do PE with Joe, it’ll be over by September.  
How long, O Lord?

When streets resemble ghost towns at peak lockdown regulation...  
When we crave a crowd, we cry out for connection from full-blown isolation...  
When millions search for online church with new-found innovation...  
Everything is online but getting loo roll is a hassle. And trust in power is eroded by trips to Barnard Castle.  
It all ends in tiers; there’s no quick fix. When you’re a table of seven but there’s a rule of six.  
How long, O Lord?

When our dreams are dashed, ambitions strangled, our Christmas plans destroyed...  
When a righteous anger rises at the murder of George Floyd...  
When families are asked to grieve behind masks at graves of treasured loved ones passed...

Life is in limbo, we are stuck in between, it's herd immunity or miracle vaccine. 2020 short-changed by COVID-19, and children aren't getting the food that they need.

With ever-growing numbers of the daily deaths presented...  
When this is the new normal... When what life was like lamented...  
Will people stop using the word unprecedented?!  
We are 'Zoomed' out, home-schooled out – restrictions extended.  
And those we love die, unattended.

I have been deprived of peace.  
I have forgotten what prosperity is.  
So, I say my splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord.  
My soul is downcast within me.

Yet, this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:  
"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

By Phil Knox

Maybe you are wondering what happened to Job after his great lament?

Finally - God responds. Not with answers to Job's string of questions. Not with explanation for the suffering of the innocent. Not with a neatly packaged answer which wins the intellectual argument.

No. With more questions.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

"Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness?"

"Who has put wisdom in the inmost parts, or given understanding to the mind?"

As with the poem we have just heard, Job is confronted with the majesty and the mystery of God, and realises that the ways and the goodness of God is far beyond his understanding.

In his letter James sums it up this way

“You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”

Our Christian story doesn't end with the suffering of Jesus on the cross, but with the glory of Jesus' resurrection. We may not be able to explain why bad things happen, but we are empowered by a faith that shows us that suffering and evil will never have the final word.

Kate Day