

Reflective Worship – Sunday 5th March

The book of Job

I am sure we all have recently seen some devastating pictures of scenes of the damage done by the recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Tens of thousands dead; many more left homeless. Towns and cities destroyed. Why?

I am sure too we have all heard stories of innocent people being caught up in the crossfire in war or conflict zones; of people being abused in relationships or other situations and of random acts of violence. We have read the news reports of the bodies of refugees being washed up on Italian beaches. Why?

And we all know of people going through personal tragedies. Young children dying of cancer; loved ones' lives cut short by illness or accident. I heard recently of a 2 year old child from Solihull who died of Strep A while on the holiday of a lifetime in Florida. Why?

Why is there suffering? Why is life so unfair? These are the questions people have been asking for thousands of years.

Fairly close to the middle of our Bibles is the book of Job.

It is usually classified as part of the wisdom literature of the Bible – so what wisdom is it aiming to impart?

But first, we need to remember it is wisdom literature. It is not history. So let's not get too worked up about whether it actually happened. Does it matter? Would it matter if Jesus made up the story of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. No, the important thing is the message. So we will assume the Book of Job is a story with a message. An Old Testament parable if you like.

It's about a man named Job. We are introduced to him very early on. He is a good man – blameless and upright is how he is described. He seems to have everything going for him.

(read Job 1:1-5)

We might say he was blessed - and it's the tendency to use those kinds of words that underlies all the argument and questioning in the book.

The book tells us of a debate in the heavenly realms about Job. Satan accuses Job of serving God for what he can get out of it – in other words Job does what is right because that gains him wealth and status. And so, we read, God allows Satan to test this out. Will Job remain faithful to God if his wealth is taken away?

And Job loses everything. Possessions, servants, family. And yet he still praises God. So God allows Satan to go further, so long as he stops at Job's life. Job is struck from head to toe with running sores. He becomes an outcast; his wife fails him; three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come to comfort him. Yet Job still holds fast to God.

The bulk of the book is a conversation between Job and these friends. Its written in wonderful eloquent (and very wordy!) poetry which can sometimes make it hard to understand the underlying argument.

After sitting with his friends in silence for seven days, Job at last speaks. He cries out in protest at what has happened. Protesting his innocence, he wishes he had never been born; he longs to find peace and release from all of this suffering. He wants to die. Why, he cries, why, why why?

(Read Job 3:1-10)

And so the cycle of his friends speaking, and Job responding begins. The arguments go something like this.

His friends in turn say that Job needs to realise that God punishes the guilty, not the innocent. In their understanding this life is all there is – death is the end. Justice then must be done in this life. Suffering is a punishment for sin, just as wealth and health are rewards for a good life. Job would do well to turn to God as a sinner, accept and admit that he has done wrong, turn from his sin and wait for forgiveness.

Job responds by declaring his innocence again. He has, he says, done nothing to deserve such suffering. He looks around, he says, and sees evil people seemingly getting away with it. He had lived a good life, he says, expecting to be rewarded with long life and a good death – but now all he had has gone. He is full of despair – what is the point of carrying on like this? He says he would put his case directly to God but God doesn't seem to answer him.

The cycle continues back and forth in much the same vein. It ends with a young man Elihu throwing his opinion into the ring. He lays it on thick to Job – the suffering that Job endures has been meted out to teach him a lesson. He needs to change his ways. At the moment he is adding the sin of rebellion against God to his other sins. Instead of longing for death, Job should be seeking to learn how he can lead a better life. Elihu finishes by telling Job not to expect an answer from God – who has far more important things to do than listen to people like him.

But, despite Elihu's assertion that God is not concerned, God speaks!

(Read Job 38:1-7)

God doesn't give any answers; there are no simple solutions to this issue of suffering. Instead God asks Job question after question.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Have you ever commanded the morning into being?
Can you control the stars?
Do you know the secrets of the wild beasts?
Is it by your wisdom that the mighty birds of prey soar in the sky?

And we can picture Job shrinking at every question. Regretting his questioning of God. His view of himself decreasing, his picture of God growing till finally he falls on his knees.

(Read Job 42:1-6)

The book finishes with God chastising Job's friends for their words to Job – the answers they put forward to Job's situation were not from God. They were a bland re-statement of the accepted position that the good are blessed by God with health, wealth and long life. Their theology was too narrow – just as Job's understanding of God was too small.

The book doesn't give any trite answers to the question of suffering. What it reminds us of is that God is far bigger than we can imagine. It puts us in our place. For us to understand all the mysteries of the universe would be to place us above God. For God to be God there has to be mystery. Maybe that's a lesson even more relevant now than in Old Testament times, more relevant in this age when we think we as humans can solve everything. There are some things we just cannot understand.

But what does come through loud and clear in Job is that as well as there being mystery in the sense that we never fully understand God, there is also certainty. God is all powerful. From the beginning of time till now he is in control. He is also good – we can trust in him. He may not give us the answers we want, but he knows our inmost thoughts. Putting trust in God is a firmer foundation than trusting ourselves or others.

But none of this means we shouldn't cry out to God in our sufferings. Within the book of Psalms there are plenty of examples of the psalmist crying out to God. Psalm 13 is a good example

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

*Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

*But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

In many ways the psalm follows the pattern of Job – the psalmist crying out in anger and frustration and finishing in a statement of faith and trust – even though there is no sign of God actually answering in the way he wanted or hoped.

And of course, we live in different times. Whereas for Job there was no belief in the resurrection, for us as Christians we believe in eternal life and in a God who knows all about suffering.

We look at Christ on the cross and see that the God who is beyond all human understanding is prepared on the cross to shoulder the whole burden of all human pain and suffering and sin. He knows about suffering; he weeps with us and grieves with us. And through the life, death and

resurrection of Jesus he has given us the hope of eternal life. This surely is the Christian hope – a hope than neither Job nor any of his friends had – because they thought that what we see is all there is.

So we come tonight with our own questions.

With our own doubts maybe

With things we cannot comprehend

With things we grieve and cry over

We will stay quiet for a moment as we bring them to God. Maybe in our hearts we want to shout out to God

If we wish we can use the stone on our chair to symbolise our questions and concerns and place it at the foot of the cross as we place our trust in him.