

Sermon
2021

Sunday 9 May

Lesson Job 38: 1 – 7, 16 – 24

Once upon a time in the land of Uz, there lived a man named Job, who was blameless and upright. Job had seven sons, three daughters, thousands of sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and many servants. He was ‘the greatest of all people of the east’. The Book of Job is a spectacular piece of storytelling; it is mythology at its very best. Here, at the centre of Scripture, the ancients asked the question, ‘Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?’

On 1 November 1755 an earthquake and tsunami destroyed large parts of Lisbon. It was All Saints’ Day and most of the town’s population was in church. At least 60,000 people died. Voltaire wrote:

These women, these infants heaped one upon the other, these limbs scattered beneath shattered marbles; the hundred thousand unfortunates whom the earth devours, who – bleeding and torn, still palpitating, interred beneath their roofs – end their lamentable days without comfort, amid the horror of their torment!

.....
What crime and what sin have they committed,
these infants crushed and bleeding on their
mothers' breasts?

If God is a God of love, mercy and justice, why do innocent people suffer? The patriarch Abraham demanded of God, 'Shall not the Judge of the Earth do justice?' In the Book of Exodus, Moses rebuked God, 'Why have you mistreated [your] people?' In the Jewish tradition, some believe that the Book of Job was written by Moses. God had not given an answer to Moses and so, through writing a novel, Moses sought his own answer.

In the book, Satan invited God to test Job. Satan said, 'Job is a righteous man but take from him his happiness, wealth and status, and only then will You know how righteous he truly is.' God agreed and, through one tragedy after another, Job lost his sons, daughters, livestock and servants. Job was further afflicted with sores from head to foot. His torment led him to curse the day he was born:

The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks

their poison ... I loathe my life.

Job believed God to have 'poisoned' him and provocatively asked, 'Who will judge God?' Job's wife pleaded with him to curse God and die, while his friends repeatedly said that he was being punished for the wrongs in his life. What answer is there to the suffering in our lives, to the suffering of humanity?

During the American Civil War, in the midst of bloody battles and months of uncertainty, Willie and Tad Lincoln, sons of the President, fell ill with typhoid. Tad recovered but 11 year old Willie died. Day and night the President and his wife had kept vigil at their son's bedside. The President said that Willie was, 'the most lovable boy I ever knew, bright, sensible, sweet-tempered and gentle-mannered.' After the funeral, the President visited his son's vault many times. Though historians doubt it, newspapers at the time reported that the President had the coffin opened on two occasions so that he could see his son. One survived; one did not. We do not need to think of tsunamis or tragic and premature deaths

to wonder why there is so much suffering in the world, suffering in our own lives?

From out of the whirlwind, God answered Job's complaint. Far from a compassionate response, God said to Job, 'Who are you to question me?' 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.' 'Can you draw out Leviathan [the sea monster] with a fish hook, or press down its tongue with a cord?'

Drawing on the terrifying imagery of Leviathan, the English poet William Blake substituted the tiger for the sea monster:

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

The fire is the fire from the mouth of Leviathan and, in the late eighteenth century when Blake was writing, England's neighbour, France, was in the midst of revolution. After the Paris massacres,

some thought the revolutionaries to be a ravaging beast establishing a republic of tigers. Turmoil, suffering and injustice are everywhere in human history.

God said to Job, ‘Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?’ It is possible that, in responding to Job, God is saying that humanity can never understand the complexities and inter-relatedness of the universe. Often out of misfortune, out of moments of true darkness, new life and new possibilities can emerge. It is *never* that we would invite misfortune but, sometimes though not always, out of terrible circumstances, change, growth and maturation come.

The American actor, Christopher Reeves, was paralysed from the neck down in an accident after he was thrown from his horse.

After the accident, he wanted to die. His wife told him that, if he asked her, she would kill him. He never did ask but went on to find new purpose in his life. Reeves said that he would *never* wish such suffering on anybody but that, because of the change in his life, he

liked the person he had become better than the person he had been. His earlier life had been focussed on success, money, influence and popularity while, in his 'second' life, his focus was on the welfare and wellbeing of others. This is delicate theology, and we need to be careful. In less dramatic ways, however, we too may have suffered because of events outwith our control or suffered because of our own foolishness and mistakes yet, paradoxically, we may feel that we have grown and matured as people. Events and mistakes may be vehicles for our self-transformation. We cannot speak for others; only ourselves.

For me, God's apparently cold response reveals that God heard and felt Job's suffering: through every word, sigh and silence, day and dark night, God had been there unconditionally. God's answer is not intellectually neat or satisfying but it is a source of strength and hope: God's Presence is real and loving.

The Jewish philosopher, Edith Stein, converted to Christianity in 1922 and became a Carmelite nun. She taught in a monastery in

the Netherlands but when the Dutch bishops condemned Nazi racism, Stein and other converts were arrested. Before being taken to the gas chambers in Auschwitz, Stein offered this prayer:

O my God, fill my soul with holy joy, courage, and strength to serve You. Enkindle Your love in me and then walk with me along the next stretch of road before me.

I do not see very far ahead, but when I have arrived where the horizon now closes down, a new prospect will open before me, and I shall meet it with peace.

Like Job, Stein had no answers to the terrible events that befell her but, in her soul, she found the peace of God.

Amen.