

St. Aidan's West Epping, 21st October 2018

WHY ME, GOD?

(Job 38:1-7; Psalm 104:1-10,26; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45)

If you were here last week, you would have heard a rather strange reading from the Book of Job, which is providing our Old Testament readings this month. It is the sort of reading that might make some people wonder whether it really is the word of the Lord, for which we give thanks to God! In that reading from Chapter 23, Job is complaining bitterly. He is going through dreadful suffering, and he wants to understand why. He wants to have it out with God. Surely God is willing to debate with Job, but he seems to be hiding from Job. As I said, it is a rather strange reading. But the scriptures don't just deliver doctrine and laws: they also tell us about life and how people experience it.

Of course, the passage is a short sample from one of the longest books in the scriptures, 42 chapters. In Chapters 1-2, which we heard a couple of weeks ago, we were introduced to Job, whom God praises as a truly righteous man: not perfect of course, but one who responds in faith and faithfulness to God and his call.

Satan, the accuser, is suspicious about Job. Life is working well for him: he is wealthy, he has his health, and he has his wife and family. Why would Job stop serving God when life works for him? But if Job was subjected to a bit of pain, if he suddenly found life was difficult, Satan insists that he would toss his faith away, he would give up on God.

God has confidence in Job's faithfulness, and he gives Satan permission to put Job to the test. And very soon calamity hits this good man: his children are killed, his wealth is destroyed, he is inflicted with a terrible painful disease which cuts him off from his people. Even his wife says that he would be better off to curse God and die. And yet Job continues in his faith and his faithfulness to God. No wonder James in his letter writes of the patience or steadfastness of Job!

Then three friends come to see Job. They stay with him in the silence, acknowledging his pain and suffering, sitting in sympathy and solidarity with him. Then in Chapter 3, Job opens his mouth to express and bewail his terrible suffering in very strong terms. And in response, his friends make their great mistake: they open their big mouths! Their silence had

been golden: but their words were ignorant, and only served to rub salt into Job's dreadful wounds.

Why? They knew that God promised to bless those who obeyed him. They knew God's warnings that he would punish those who rebelled against him. And they jumped to the conclusion that God must be punishing Job for some grievous sins that they didn't know about.

It was not actually very logical. It was not actually true to life. But it was one form of the conventional wisdom of the day. If you are suffering, God must be punishing you for some wrong you have done.

And so they warned Job and ordered him and pleaded with him to acknowledge whatever it was that he must have done, to turn back to God in humble repentance, and to accept God's forgiveness, and deliverance. Job's response was that there was no grievous sin that he needed to confess and repent of. Job's friends became more and more determined to get Job to acknowledge his guilt, and they were shocked by his obstinacy, which only showed what a hardened sinner he was. Job in turn became more and more frustrated with his friends. He turned from them to God, pleading and even demanding that God explain himself, and that he declare Job not guilty. We heard something of that last Sunday.

Let's just pause and think about the issue as we see and experience it today. We know that good things do happen to good people, and that bad things do happen to bad people. When a criminal is punished, we don't ask why God is allowing this to happen. It is appropriate. We sometimes see unpleasant things happen to people, and can see that they have only themselves to blame. And sometimes lovely things happen to people whom we would regard as "good people". That's all fine.

But life in this world is not always like that. Sometimes bad people seem to get away with the terrible things they do. And sometimes bad things do happen to "good people". And sometimes bad things happen to **us**. Illness, family or financial stress, loved ones who die or become ill. If we judge everything in the world on the basis of fairness, lots of things happen that are not fair! Job's friends had not come to terms with that reality, and trying to apply this to Job, they were hurting rather than helping him. A reminder that **being there** for people who are struggling is often much more helpful than **trying to give explanations!**

Why is this so? It really goes back to Genesis. This may be more a spiritual way than a scientific way of looking at things, but it is an important reality. Genesis tells us that God made creation good, and that he made us humans in his own image. Problems came when the first people decided to go their own way, to reject God's small restrictions, to try to become like God rather than living as his people. As a result, Genesis tells us that things went wrong. Pain and struggle and tension came into life: creation is not as it was meant to be. Nor are we!

If the world was still perfect, everything would be beautiful and everything would be fair. If we were still perfect, life in God's world would be very different. But instead, we still have much that is beautiful and wonderful, so much to give thanks to God for. But there are also the problems of the world. This world is a mix, and so are we!

God's image in us is still there, but it is distorted: we still have so much capacity and so much that is good. So we are aware of God's standards, and we see them as important, but we don't always live up to them. And we value justice and fairness, but they don't always happen.

So we appreciate God's world which provides so wonderfully for the needs of people: and yet we are also aware of the ravage of drought and flood and natural disaster. God's creation is good: but it is not all that it was meant to be, and the good news is that it is not as it **will** be. God promises that in his good time, there will be a new creation, a transformed creation, where all that is wrong will be put right, and where evil and injustice will finally have no place. But right now our world is a world where life does not always seem to be fair.

Well, we left Job and his friends arguing fruitlessly with each other. And that takes us all the way from chapters 3 to 37. And now we reach Chapter 38. Job has been desperately asking God to explain himself. He is an innocent man. Why is God treating him like this?

God's answer, of which we heard the first few verses this morning, is wonderful, and yet it is not exactly what Job or his friends were seeking or expecting. Over four chapters, God takes Job on a Cook's tour of creation: the elements beyond us, and also a variety of creatures: wondrous, powerful, strange, terrifying. He challenges Job about his knowledge of

creation, and whether he has the wisdom or the power to run the world as Job would want to have it.

But what God never does is to answer Job's questions about why all this has happened to him. Job will never be told, and that is actually one of the wonderful things about this book.

You see, when things go wrong for us or for someone we care about, we naturally ask "Why, God? Why me God? Why that person God?" I've done that, and I imagine that many of you have too. Job reminds us that usually there is no answer to the question that is available to us. Job suffered in the dark. And the book of Job has a message for those who suffer in the dark.

But in this 38th chapter, God makes clear to Job that **he** is still there, that he understands what Job has been going through, and he assures Job that he is still with him. Like us, Job didn't get an answer to that question "Why?", but what he did come to realize is that God was there with him even in his pain and suffering. God had heard his prayers, and although the answer seemed slow in coming, God was working his purpose out for Job's good, and in fact for the good of so many people who take in the message of this special book.

Our reading from Hebrews points out that "Jesus offered up supplications and prayers with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard." Did that mean that Jesus was saved from having to die that terrible death? Of course not! God's answers do not always make life easy. In Jesus' case, he triumphed by dying, not by being saved from dying. He endured that baptism of which he spoke to his disciples in today's Gospel: he drank that cup that he must drink. Was it fair? Not in the normal sense! But it was what would ensure the triumph of God's kingdom, and bring forgiveness to God's people.

Life is not always fair in this world. Things may well happen that will lead us to say: "Why me God?" But the suffering of Jesus points us to the reality that God is with us in the pain, that God is with us and still cares for us, and will bring blessing even out of those tough times. Amen.

Paul Weaver