

Facing Suffering (the story of Job) by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 25th July 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Job 19; 1 Peter 4:7-14

The book of Job is not one of the best known in the Bible. If people have heard of Job, the principal character, at all, it is in the phrase "to have the patience of Job". A free online dictionary defines this as follows:

To have an immense and unyielding degree of patience and conviction, especially in the face of problems or difficulty. A reference to the biblical figure Job, whose absolute faith in God remained unshaken despite the numerous afflictions set upon himself, his family, and his estate by Satan.¹

Quite a thorough summary of the Book of Job! And you may well be thinking, "Job was clearly a saint, but I'm not sure I'm of the same calibre when it comes to facing suffering myself".

Job is certainly put through the mill: in the first 2 chapters his massive wealth of livestock – oxen, donkeys, camels – are stolen by raiding tribesmen, and his servants killed, and then his seven grown-up sons and three daughters are killed in a freak weather accident. Job's response is to utter the words that have become famous: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). And on top of all this, Job himself is struck down with a terrible skin disease, and despite his wife urging him to

¹ <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/have+the+patience+of+Job> accessed 25/7/2021

“Curse God and die” (2:9), Job philosophically replies, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”. The narrator sums up “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (2:10 NRSV).

Job is certainly portrayed as a good man. In fact, God’s own description of him is “a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8, 2:3).

But that does not mean that Job just takes it all on the chin. His 3 friends come and sit with him in silence for seven days, because they see how great is his suffering (2:13). And then Job opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth. And over the following chapters, Job complains about his suffering, and the chapter we have heard read this evening is part of one of his speeches during the course of the book. His physical suffering is nothing compared to his mental suffering, and this is more than the deep grief he feels for the loss of his children. The prevailing view in Old Testament times was that God ran the universe according to principles of justice: he rewarded the good with blessings, and punished the wicked with misfortune. We can see examples of this in the stories of the patriarchs – Abraham and Jacob both become wealthy because of the favour of God. Several of the psalms carry this theme². So why has God brought disaster on a man like Job who was a paragon of virtue? It seems so unfair. What has Job done to deserve all these misfortunes? He cannot make any sense of it.

There are many people today who struggle as much as Job does to understand why bad things happen to good people.

² E.g. Psalms 37, 73

To find that you or someone you love has incurable cancer, or suffers an accident that was not their fault, can be a terrible shock, one that you are completely unprepared for. And, like Job, some people seem to have to cope with multiple misfortunes all together, or in quick succession. Human beings are rational creatures, and we seek to know the reason why things happen. We also have an innate sense of justice, and it seems unfair, even cruel, for an innocent person to have to suffer. And if there is a God who is in charge of the universe, he ought to be protecting good people from misfortune. If there's a quota of cancers, or accidents, that has to be met, then surely God ought to direct those at the "bad" people on the earth – it would serve them right for their selfish behaviour.

This is the mindset of Job's three friends. They argue that Job's misfortunes must be due to sins that he has committed. God is a God of justice, and he punishes the wicked for their sins, but if they repent he is also a God of forgiveness. So their solution for Job is that he acknowledge God's justice, repent of whatever sins he has committed, and then God will restore him.

As you can imagine, such reasoning is of no comfort to Job. And his friends' efforts to counsel him have left us with the phrase "Job's comforters", in other words, a description of people whose attempts to comfort others just rub salt in their wounds.

So in chapter 19 Job lashes out:

'How long will you torment me
and crush me with words?

Ten times now you have reproached me;
shamelessly you attack me. (Job 19:2-3, NIV)

And at the end of the chapter he warns them to beware of being judged for their treatment of him:

‘If you say, “How we will hound him,
since the root of the trouble lies in him,”
you should fear the sword yourselves;
for wrath will bring punishment by the sword,
and then you will know that there is judgment.’
(19:28-29, NIV)

But Job’s frustration at his so-called friends’ attempts to explain his misfortunes is nothing compared with his frustration with God. It is true that Job does not stop believing in God. But nor does he doubt himself. He knows that he has done nothing to deserve the suffering he has endured. So what he can’t understand is what God is playing at. And it’s not just that his suffering is unjust: he feels powerless in the face of the might of God. He wants to complain to God, but knows that God has all the cards – he is, after all, the omnipotent ruler of the universe.

‘Though I cry, “Violence!” I get no response;
though I call for help, there is no justice.
He has blocked my way so that I cannot pass;
he has shrouded my paths in darkness.
He has stripped me of my honour
and removed the crown from my head.
He tears me down on every side till I am gone;
he uproots my hope like a tree.
His anger burns against me;
he counts me among his enemies. (19:7-11 NIV)

Job wants to meet God face to face and get an explanation. But if God is his enemy, how can Job, a mere mortal, prevail against him? He needs an advocate, a mediator who will take up his case before God, and ensure that he gets a fair hearing.

And this is where this well-known but enigmatic passage in verses 25-27 comes in. Many of us will know the aria “I know that my Redeemer liveth” from the beginning of Part 3 of Handel’s oratorio *The Messiah*. The King James Version, used by Handel, reads:

I know that my redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:
And though after my skin worms destroy this body,
yet in my flesh shall I see God. (19:25-26 KJV)

Handel’s lyricist put these verses together with verses from St Paul about the resurrection of Christ. In the original context of the book of Job, they represent Job daring to hope that someone will stand up for him in his case against God. Perhaps he is hoping for an angelic being, someone in God’s heavenly court, to bring his case before the Almighty.

So how does it all turn out in the end? Job does get an answer from God in chapters 38 to 41. But God’s answer does not include an explanation of Job’s suffering. God does not see the need to justify himself to Job:

‘Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?’
(40:1, NIV)

God’s answer to Job is to ask him where Job was when God was designing the universe, when he set the earth on its foundations, determined the limits of the seas, set the stars

on their courses, created the variety of wild animals on the earth, or tamed the monsters of the primordial chaos? The workings of the universe are far more complex than the human mind can comprehend. God's wisdom is beyond our understanding. He is not accountable to us for how he allows good and bad things to happen.

Today is the feast of St James, the fisherman apostle and brother of John. Acts chapter 12 tells us how James was killed by Herod, and only a few verses later his co-apostle Peter is also arrested but miraculously released from prison at night by an angel. Why did God allow James to be killed, but rescued Peter? "God moves in a mysterious way/ his wonders to perform"³.

God's speech in the concluding chapters of the book show the simplistic idea that good things should only happen to good people and bad things to bad people to be naïve and completely irrelevant. The universe as God has designed it just simply doesn't work like that. As it says in the hymn I just quoted:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.

At least Job does get personal attention from the Almighty. And in the last chapter, God restores the fortunes of Job, making him twice as wealthy as at the beginning and blessing him with another 7 sons and 3 daughters.

³ *God moves in a mysterious way* by William Cowper (1731-1800)

Is that all we can say about the meaning of suffering? As Christians we do not have any better *explanation* than the book of Job. But there *is* another angle on the problem of suffering, and for that we must look to the Cross, where we see another man who suffered terribly. There Jesus cried out like Job “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” As Isaiah prophesied centuries before:

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5 NIV)

We have a God who, in the person of his Son, experienced the depths of abandonment and the extremities of pain, but rose victorious over sin and death and opened the gate of heaven to mortals.

And so we can say, with even more confidence than Job, and with the assurance of hope that comes from knowing ourselves to be redeemed by Christ, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” One day we shall see God face to face⁴, and we shall then know whatever we need to know. And even more wonderfully, we shall know that we are, and always have been, deeply loved by our Creator and our Father, and by Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend.

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 13:12