

2025 TALK – SERIES ON JOB (1) – JOB 1:1-13/2:1-13 & LUKE 23:26-38

THE QUESTION OF SUFFERING... & OUR SUFFERING GOD

As someone commented, quite rightly, at our last church meeting on Wednesday: "It's not fair!"... Which reminded me of a conversation I had with my Nan, back in the 80s. I had proudly shown her the front page of a national newspaper, showing me taking part in a protest against the 'poll tax'. But my no-nonsense Yorkshire Nan was less than impressed... "Why do you want to take part in such a protest?", she asked me indignantly. I sheepishly said something like: "The poll tax is unfair!". To which she simply replied: "Life is unfair!". I couldn't argue with that. That was the end of that brief conversation! She was a woman of few words, my Nan! You argued with her at your peril!...

But that's the thing isn't it? We look at the situation in Gaza. We know it is deeply unfair - that the whole population of that thin strip of land are being punished for the atrocities carried out by those Hamas gunmen, nearly 2 years ago now. And when we turn to the experience of Job, we have to conclude again: 'It's not fair'... Not fair this happens to someone who appears to have done absolutely nothing wrong. How come someone, so outstandingly righteous - from God's own description of Job - ends up suffering so horribly...?

The question of suffering - inevitably - was mentioned in one of the Alpha small groups on Tuesday night. It's a perennial question, which every generation asks. But the same question can be asked in a number of different ways. 'Why am I suffering?' is subtly different to the question of 'Why is there so much suffering in the world?'... And another question, asked by Job and his so-called comforters, is different again: 'What have I done to deserve this suffering?' And if we direct this question to God, it naturally becomes more pointed: 'How can you, as a God of love, allow this to happen, to me or to them, or anyone?...'

The way we frame the question, from what vantage point & who we direct the question to, are all vital in trying to begin to answer this question. I must say from the start - I don't pretend that this sermon is going to 'answer' this age-old & thorny issue. That's partly because each question is different, because each person & situation is different. It's also partly because people within Carey, right now, are facing all manner of suffering & anguish. Poor health. Family crises. The loss or anticipated loss of loved ones. Too many people to

number who we know are going through particularly awful situations... But I do hope, in some small way, these few words might be a comfort to them.

So, there is one thing we need to clear up straight away, before we consider more fully Job's experience of suffering. All of us, Job included, cannot help asking: 'Why?'... And that sometimes leads us to the question: 'What have I done to deserve all this?...' And this is where the Book of Job is particularly helpful for us, if we experience suffering ourselves. The Book of Job puts paid to that way of thinking that says: 'If someone is suffering terribly, they **must** have done something wrong!' This way of thinking is clearly wrong ! It's wrong to think, in any way, of God using suffering to administer a very curious form of 'justice'... Yes, it is true that sometimes, people do suffer because of their own sin. Perhaps most obvious in this regard, from all the characters of the Bible is the betrayer of Jesus, the disciple Judas. For whatever reason (and I can't believe it was just for 30 pieces of silver), Judas agreed to betray his LORD. But afterwards, he was so tormented by guilt, that he took his own life.

But usually, it is not often the case that you can pin someone's particular suffering on a particular sin. The fact is, life in this world is profoundly & fundamentally 'unfair'. The Book of Job should help stop people asking the question: 'What have I done to deserve this?'. But inevitably, this Book then confronts us with other questions. For example: 'Why on earth would God enter into a wager with Satan over Job?...' The writer of Job, whoever that was, had no problem imagining God entering into this curious arrangement with Satan. But I confess, I do have a problem with this. As do most readers of this book & most Bible scholars, inc. one of my lecturers from Spurgeons College.

What I come back to here though, is that God does not inflict these terrible disasters on Job, but it is Job's enemy who does this... Yes, OK, with God's permission, which is the difficult part. But a close reading suggests it is not God who inflicts these disasters. It is a dis-ordered creation & world & Satan too, which inflicts both these multiple bereavements & this awful illness on Job. Yes, one of the disasters (chap. 1 & verse 16) talks of 'the fire of God fell from the heavens'. But this could be seen as a primitive understanding of lightning. Not necessarily a case of **God** sending 'fire from heaven'...

The opening of the Book of Job is deeply puzzling. No surprise there, given it is dealing with one of the profound mysteries of all time. This book is also deeply

humbling, because it is so honestly human. It also reveals our Creator God. It reveals God, who despite dwelling in the glory of heaven, does answer our complaints & prayers. A God who chooses to reveal himself, even in the midst of suffering - or you might say, **particularly** in the depths of suffering & despair.

There are two sayings of Job I want to highlight here. The first experience I find hard to relate to. The second experience I can completely relate to. First of all, when Job hears the news of the terrible deaths of all his seven sons & three daughters, his servants & all his livestock... How does he react? He tears his robes in absolute anguish of heart & he shaves his head. The outward appearance of how he is feeling inside: torn, coming apart, bereft of any sense of goodness... But then he worships God & says these words, often quoted at funerals: 'The LORD has given & the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'... I'm not at all convinced, if I had just heard of the awful deaths of my daughters & two grandsons, that I could so quickly worship God & come out with such a statement. It shows that Job was a truly faithful man.

The part that I **can** entirely relate to, in these two opening chapters, is this exchange between Job & his wife. Having lost all her family & seeing Job struck down with sores all over his body, she says to her husband: 'Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God & die...!'. Now I can completely understand why Job's wife would say such a thing, from the bitterness of her grief. Other preachers might rebuke Job's wife for these words. & certainly, Job's own response to her would seem to support such a judgement against her. But notice, he doesn't say: 'You are a foolish woman'. He says, 'You are talking like a foolish woman'... This implies that Job, even in this time of great anguish for them both, understands that his wife would not normally say something like this. She would not normally behave & like 'a foolish woman'...

And I have to say at this point – for every foolish woman in the world, there are probably 10 foolish men. Foolish here in the sense of not believing God. And I confess I have to count myself among the foolish men. At times, too often, not fully believing God. Not always trusting in God's goodness. Not always believing that God can speak healing & hope into the most difficult situations. Eg, I'm finding it hard to believe for healing & hope for Gaza & Ukraine right now.

But God **is** growing my faith for our church to find a way forward in the coming weeks. I hope this will also be your experience, as we seek God in prayer for

this church. As we echo that prayer that echoes down from the desperate lips of a bereaved father: 'LORD, I do believe, help me in my unbelief'...

In our next visit to the Book of Job, next month, we will find him agonising & wrestling with God. Asking those searching, hard, unanswerable questions. He journeys through what the spiritual giants of the faith would call: 'the dark night of the soul'. This is the heart & guts of the Book of Job. For the most part, this book is simply Job crying out to God. It also involves him having to bat away some of the comments of his so-called friends. It also involves Job not hearing from God, for a long period. And then God, finally gives his answer to all of Job's complaints. We hear a mild rebuke to Job and a sterner rebuke to Job's comforters. And tacked on right at the end, is a not entirely helpful Hollywood 'happy ending'... I do struggle with both the beginning & end of Job. But the big heart of this book is a gut-wrenching & brutally honest exploration of human suffering ... It also depicts God's dreadful absence & glorious presence, as well as God's awesome response to all Job's complaints & prayers.

So, the most fitting place for us to leave Job is here in verse 8. Here he is, scraping his sores & sitting among the rubble & ashes of his life. He feels utterly forsaken, first by God & then later by his so-called 'friends'. Profoundly 'unfair'.

Yet, as we think of Job & his awful situation, there is someone else we are called to remember... As we prepare to gather round the LORD's table this morning, let us not forget this: If we want to see something that is 'not fair', we need not look any further than Jesus dying on the cross. The Holy One of God, being subjected to one of the most awful forms of capital punishment devised by human beings. Jesus was betrayed by one of his friends, deserted by the rest & tortured to death by those who called themselves 'the people of God'... Someone who had wholeheartedly loved God & loved people every moment of every day, ending his earthly life like this. 'Not fair...?' Doesn't come close...

From the cross, Jesus echoes the anguished prayer of the Psalmist (& also Job): 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (*). Even as Jesus is marched to the cross & nailed to it, he is still thinking of those around him. Thinking of the daughters of Jerusalem. Thinking of his mother & his disciples. Thinking of all those implicated in his death, ourselves included, sinners as we are. He cries out: 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do...'. Jesus chose to go the way of the cross, to share in the whole human experience of desolation &

dereliction. Jesus did this, so that through him, the Holy One of God, we too might experience resurrection & new life. Alleluia ! Thanks be to God for the good news of Christ – our Saviour crucified, risen & promising to come again.

TIME OF QUIET

Before we celebrate communion, I would like us to watch a video, about the Christian response to the suffering of Gaza. Then I have a challenge for each of us, as part of our response to our suffering Messiah, Jesus of the Holy Land.