

Amersham Free Church, 25th Oct 2015

Job 38:1-7; Mk. 10:35-45

Questions with Answers

Our readings this morning revolve around a series of questions. There are questions being asked by people of faith and questions being asked by God. Some of the questions seem to hover in the air, almost like ghosts, without easy answers. Some of the questions will make us wince because they voice deep fears or uncomfortable truths. But in the ebb and flow of this biblical questioning and answering we catch a glimpse of tremendous truths. It is as if today's texts allow us to listen in upon those things that truly matter; to the essence of our own existence. Here is something of our own heartbeat, our own pilgrimage, our own living, our own longing.

The journey the book of Job captures is the all-too familiar one of inexplicable, unpredictable, unfair suffering. It is a journey many of us will recognise. It is perhaps, today's journey for some of us. Even harder, possibly, it is the journey we are taking alongside loved ones. Just this week I sat with someone whose partner, with no warning, was discovered to have a brain tumour. The operation to remove it has gone well and therapy continues. But in an instant a life that stretched ahead for decades is being measured in months. And we sat together with Job's fundamental, fearful, ferocious questions: "Why?" "Why me?" "Why us?" "Why now?" "Why this?" And, frighteningly for people of faith, we sat with Job's other question: "Where is God?"

Take heart that such questions are possible and permissible amongst us. Again and again and again I have had cause to praise God that the Bible holds a book like Job, and that so many of the Psalms take us to similar territory, similar experiences, similar questions. Suffering, loss, unfairness, anger, helplessness, fear, emptiness all find their places in the pages of the Bible, and especially within Job and the Psalms. We have good cause, sometimes, to come this way and turn to such texts. In our fragility and frailty we can know fear, and fear for faith, and find our deepest needs given voice by scripture. God, it becomes clear, is not afraid to hear our truest words, our deepest needs, our fullest measure of despair.

So it is that Job, sucked down into the depths of suffering, demands God's answer. Back in chapter 23 Job speaks:

"Even today my complaint is bitter; [God's] hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him...I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me..."

If God orders the world so that goodness is rewarded and sinfulness is punished, if our lives are shaped by such neat divine cause and effect, then Job's belief in his own goodness demands that God face him and explain this unjustified anguish.

God shows up in today's text. Significantly, amidst the turmoil of Job's questions, God speaks within the sound and fury of a storm. This is not the still small voice that Elijah heard. This is the voice of powerful presence. Job doesn't get the sort of answers he was looking for, and perhaps we don't either. Instead, God fires off a series of questions for Job:

“Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?”

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?”

“Who marked off its dimensions?”

“Who stretched a measuring line across it?”

“...who laid its cornerstone...?”

After 37 chapters of theological argument, after page upon page of discussion between Job and his so-called comforters about the roots of suffering and the certainties of faith, God brutally cuts argument and discussion short. Who are you, Job? Where were you, Job?

And so it will continue, as the coming chapters unfold, with God’s demanding questions that keep on highlighting that Job is small, and God is great. In the face of all Job’s questions, demands, anger and hurt, God remains aloof and untouchable. The book of Job is written to unfold a mystery, and it is the mystery of God’s greatness and our smallness. We cannot put God on trial and expect to win. We cannot demand an answer and expect to hear one. We cannot force God’s hand. We cannot make God fit our theology.

John Calvin, in the Geneva of the 16th century, preached a series of sermons on the Book of Job. Each sermon ends the same way, with these words: “Now we shall bow in humble reverence before the face of our God.” Job is written, perhaps, to remind us that our faith must weather storms. Suffering, loss, anger; these things will come. And as they do, God may seem elusive and silent. We can and do pray for miracles, for healing, for new life. Surely we must. Sometimes answers will come to prayer that we can sense and celebrate. Wonders will happen. But sometimes there will be the long, lingering, silence. Even then, suggests the Book of Job, God is still God and we are still called to entrust our lives into God’s hands. I think we sensed something of that as we sat this week together and spoke of a brain tumour and of the fear. We found no ready answer. But that did not mean there was no God. We found no explanation. But that did not mean we were not still God’s precious children. We were where people have been so many times, where the pastoral care of this congregation and all of you who minister within it know so well. We were where Job finds himself. We were in the storm. And we were still with God, and God was still with us. In all humility, still we could pray, and say, and know that God is with us.

It may seem that our reading from the Gospel of Mark has little connection with this difficult instalment from the Book of Job. It certainly took me plenty of pondering to try to connect the two. But connect, perhaps, they do. The wonder and glory of scripture is that, like the stars in a dark night’s sky, it shines with countless points of light and becomes a constellation united in illuminating the glory and the mystery of God, and God’s ways with creation. Again and again, in a host of different voices, the Bible speaks of God to us, and of ourselves. So, alongside God’s tough questioning of Job, we find Jesus and the disciples with questions of their own. And, once more, we stumble upon ourselves.

James and John voice a question that is crafted out of a potent mix of vanity, ambition, selfishness and pride. We cannot help but notice how, even before their question is set free, these sons of Zebedee seek to back Jesus into the corner that their desires demand:

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Here the echo of Job begins to ring in our ears. Once more people of faith are setting out to control and shape and hold the will of God. James and John are fashioning in their hearts a way of faith that places them firmly in the driving seat and relegates God in Christ equally firmly to being only their passenger.

“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

Their question is a request for power and privilege, for status and security, for greatness and glory. Perhaps it seems a very odd request, and one far from anything we might dream up or be guilty of. But I wonder. Might it not be that security is a prayer we pray as we ask God to protect us and our loved ones? Might it not be that success, and the status success can bring, might sometimes hover just a little too close to our prayers for ourselves, our church, our denomination? Could it not be that our motives become just a little cloudy and rather catastrophic?

Mark tells this story with tremendous care. It gets recorded as both a report about the disciples and a warning about the Church. At Westminster I taught last week using material collected from surveys of those who had left the Church. They gave many reasons. But, achingly, amongst their major reasons was the brutal fact that they did not find the churches they had belonged to mirroring the life of Christ. They had found argument, bickering, arrogance and pride. And they had gone away. Many had not stopped believing in God. They just hadn't found God reflected in the lives of the churches they had known.

Mark tells this story with tremendous care. James and John make their request as the third act in a three act drama. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 all include Jesus teaching that he will go to the cross. Three times he speaks of his mission in terms of humble offering of himself; of dying, but also then of resurrection on the third day. Each time Jesus delivers this lesson the disciples miss the point, or reject the teaching. James and John have missed the point a third time. And the others get angry with them as they miss the point again as well.

It is heartening to know that the disciples can be this close to Jesus, and not understand. Human frailty is at the heart of the Church and at the heart of believing.

In its own way the word that Jesus brings to us today is as difficult as the voice of God ringing in the ears of Job. It is all about letting go of any desire to be in control. It is all about letting go of any need for domination. It is all about letting go of any attempt to bargain with God. It is, instead, about offering, about giving, about allowing in our daily living a space that God might fill and thus transform our living. It is about following where Jesus has already led:

“You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with...”

And so we can as we share in baptism and share the bread and wine of communion and know that holiness comes close as we try to live together in this home of faithfulness.

What does this look like?

“...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all...”

What does this look like? In words attributed to St Francis of Assisi we are invited into this way of Jesus, into God's way:

“O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

There is mystery here. There is challenge and testing. With James and John we can get things very, very wrong. We can push God aside.

But this way to be that Jesus offers is also amazing possibility. It is our invitation to discover our true selves as we let ourselves go into the love and purposes and goodness of God.

This world can know too much of domination, of pride and power and arrogance. That is not the way for us. For us the way is servanthood; daily obedience to the will of God. And the more we discover what that means, the closer we come to being who we truly are created to be.