

Sermon for 24 October 2021

St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle

Last Sunday after Trinity: Job 42: 1-6, 10-17 (OT); Mark 10: 46-52 (NT)

May my words and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I have a rather peculiar habit. I like reading the back pages of a newspaper first, be it the *Guardian Weekly*, my favourite paper, or the weekly *Church Times*. Have you ever indulged in such a thing? Perhaps, with a new book? Tempted to read the Conclusion first? Or, even catching the last episode of an interesting TV series, then working your way slowly through the series via BBC iPlayer?

So, it feels like it when we read a passage like Job 42, being the last chapter/Epilogue and having the perspective from the 'endpoint'.

[NRSV Anglicised] **42** Then Job answered the LORD:

² 'I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
³ "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
⁴ "Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me."
⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
⁶ therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.'

The first four Sundays in October this year have 'dipping' into Job: Job 1, then 23, then 38, now 42 ... we don't get to see the whole picture! Frustrating?

Job of the Old Testament is a well-known figure. Yet, it's interesting to see how the people who devised the Revised Common Lectionary place certain books of the Bible and the frequency with which they are used. So, a large work like Job gets about nine references, mostly in this season of Trinity and two during Easter.

But what do we know about this book that has grown so much in our popular usage, culture, and imagination? What do you remember of this book? Broadly speaking, Job is contained within the Wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible dealing with practical matters, not airy-fairy stuff. Even the name Job itself speaks of a kind of perseverance, of a sort of person who can withstand the trials and tribulations that this life brings!

Outline of the Book of Job:

We could begin by saying that Job is a righteous man on whom undeserved calamity falls. It is made clear in the first two chapters of Job – the prologue [like that well-known Prologue of John's Gospel] – that the main character, Job, did everything by the book. He even prayed on behalf of his children in case they had done anything amiss!

Four calamities strike in quick succession, and he loses oxen and asses, sheep, camel and finally his sons and daughters. In all this, Job does not waver in his faith and even when he is struck down by a festering disease he still says – not wishing to curse God as his wife would have wanted – *“If we accept good from God, shall we not accept evil?”* (2:10).

It is made clear in the Prologue that Job is the victim of a wager between God and ‘the Satan’ [possibly Persian influence/4th century BCE; not the sort of evil personification that we have often seen in films and art – the horned creature, etc., culminating in the 1970s film *The Exorcist*, but much more of an enigmatic character, a sort of adversary]: **Is he only a man of faith because of the rewards – mainly material ones – that it brings?**

‘The Satan’ argues that if all is taken away from him, he will curse God and when this doesn't happen, after the four calamities that lead to the death of his children and destruction of all he owns, the Satan argues that if struck down by illness Job will certainly waver in his faith. So, a skin disease is inflicted on Job, but Job still does not give way – he is a model of piety, and the Satan appears to have lost the argument.

Then we get onto chapter 3 (the beginning of the long Dialogue, bulk of the book) and in this chapter Job becomes a different person: his complaint to God starts off the poetic section. The dialogue with his [so-called] friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, reads like a long poem!

He bewails the day of his birth and the night of his conception, and he wishes he had died at birth and longs for death, such is his suffering: *“Sighing is for me all my food; groans pour from me in a torrent.”* (3:24).

From this point onwards a dialogue follows between Job, bewailing his lot and blaming God for proving inconsistent, and his three friends who are there supposedly to comfort him, but in fact offer little but platitudes! **Job must have sinned, they say, because all suffering is the result of sin. It is not God who is unjust, rather it is Job who fails to recognise his own shortcomings.**

Job, on the other hand, is adamant that he could not have acted in a more pious way and that he is undeserving of the suffering that has been heaped upon him. His

Dialogue with the friends becomes more and more a bitter criticism against them and a call to God to answer for his actions.

In the manner akin to a lawsuit Job asks God to stand trial, but then he realises that because God is both judge and witness for the prosecution, Job doesn't stand a chance. He longs for a mediator to judge between him and God, to see that fair play is done because God has proved to Job at least, not to deal fairly with loyal believers.

In utter desperation Job cries: after three cycles of speeches – *“God himself has flung me down in the mud; I have become no better than dust or ashes. I call out to you, God, but you do not answer, I stand up to plead, but you keep aloof. You have turned cruelly against me; with your strong hand you persecute me.”* (30:19-21)

A fourth friend, Elihu, then appears – one who was presumably quite young and had been afraid to speak, deferring to the other three older and wiser friends – but he adds a few more comments – chapter 32 attacking the first three – on the nature of suffering until finally the climax of the book is reached and God appears in a whirlwind – chapter 38 [last week's readings] apparently to answer Job's questions!!

In fact, far from answering Job directly, God poses several questions, asking him where he was at creation, implying that there are things so much greater than Job that he has no right to question and to which he should not expect to have all the answers. **So, it seems that God's power is emphasised rather than God's justice explained!!**

If there is any underlying message of justice here, it is that God's justice is greater than that of humans and cannot thus be restricted by human understanding.

So, Job does not receive answers to his questions, although he humbles himself before God and apparently repents: *“What reply can I give you, I who carry no weight? I put my finger to my lips. I have spoken once; I shall not answer again; twice have I spoken; I shall do so no more.”* (40:4-5).

Then we have the happy ending – today's reading, the Epilogue – in which Job is restored to double his fortunes and even makes a sacrifice to God and interceded on behalf of the friends who are rebuked by God: *“unlike my servant Job, you have not spoken as you ought about me”* (42:7).

Job 42: 10-17 [NRSV Anglicised]

¹⁰ And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money^[a] and a gold ring. ¹² The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ He named the first Jemimah,

the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵ In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶ After this Job lived for one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. ¹⁷ And Job died, old and full of days.

I have naturally glossed over much detail in the short summary of this complex book, but it seems that Job is vindicated by God. Even more, the narrative as we read it closely seems to suggest that it is better to protest and to question than simply to repeat common assumptions and platitudes, thinking that we know even some of the deep puzzles of human life and suffering.

Can wholeness only arise out of misfortune?

There are no easy answers and it's not a rhetorical question either! Is it the right question to ask though? Even for Job it's difficult to answer either way. His understanding has grown, and through suffering Job has gone down to the depths of human existence, and although he did not apparently receive any direct answers to his questions, God did make an appearance [as far as the final form of the text is concerned] which seems to satisfy him to a certain point.

But I think Job could function as a sort of mirror to our present situation! Especially amid the global pandemic, with all its accompanying human cost, social and economic woes. The absolute direness of the refugee situation has not disappeared: massive human displacement round the world. Something we see before our very eyes today with the thousands of refugees fleeing from situations of conflict, racial hatred, environmental chaos, destruction, and instability to try to cross into safer lands into other countries and into Europe. We cannot even begin to imagine what wholeness would be for them in their seemingly endless journeying! Are they themselves to be blamed for the situations that they are fleeing from?

The question that I pose is a difficult one. Three overlapping theological themes I wish to mention briefly here [for this, I'm indebted to OT scholar, Katherine Dell, someone who has worked on Job for more than three decades]. Please bear with me.

First, based on the Prologue and Epilogue is the theme of **disinterested righteousness**; "*Has not Job good reason to be godfearing? Answered the Adversary [Satan] (1:9)*. What is Job's motivation for his faith: is it genuinely his fear of God or is it for reasons of personal prosperity and wealth?

Second theological theme concerns the problem of **retributive justice** as contained in the Dialogue between Job and his friends. Is always suffering the result of punishment for some misdeed or can there ever be cases where the principle of reward for the pious and judgement for the wicked does not work? If we believe Job to be a truly innocent sufferer, how is retributive justice to be understood and can it ever be maintained? In the Dialogue with his friends, Job's protest against their traditional arguments throws up issues of how human beings react to suffering that

are especially severe. How might we relate this to the COVID-19 pandemic without offering any cheap answers?

Thirdly, and a fundamental theological concern throughout all of Scripture, is the **relationship between God and humanity** and here specifically seen in God's speeches and Job's responses. How can one be in any meaningful relationship with God when one feels that one has been mistreated by God? It is linked to the theme of retributive justice, but it goes beyond that to the question of whether any human being would ever want a relationship with God who might act in capricious or unexpected ways? The nature of God and of God's justice, the nature of evil and even the purpose of human existence, are all implied within these questions.

Good News await us in the Gospel! **Mark 10: 46-52** [NRSV Anglicised]

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher,^[a] let me see again.' ⁵²Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

This is the last healing miracle recorded in Mark's Gospel. Jesus, while busy on his way to Jerusalem, had time to stop to engage with this blind beggar asking for help. Do we ever stop to meet with those seeking help when we walk along Northumberland Street, or do we simply 'walk on the other side'?

Bartimaeus was restored to wholeness.

Was he blind because of sin or his parents' sin – easily thought of in those days – but Jesus saw this man's faith and responded appropriately! There is an experience of *shalom* [not just the absence of strife/conflict, but security, peace, and wholeness] borne out of a brief but genuinely engaging relationship between Jesus and the blind man! It was a life changing encounter, leading to him following Jesus *on the way*.

Prayer from Benedict of Nursia (c. 550)

O gracious and holy Father,
give us wisdom to perceive you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to behold you,
a heart to meditate upon you,
and a life to proclaim you,
through the power of the Spirit
of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.