

God knows best – dealing with disappointment / unanswered prayer

Sunday 24 February 2019

Introduction

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be always pleasing to you, our Lord and redeemer. Amen

I know that on a number of occasions I have commented on being given particularly difficult themes, but today I have no such complaints, as our theme this morning gives me the opportunity to talk about three of my favourite authors – Job, Jonah and St John of the Cross. Before you get too concerned about the possible length of the sermon, let me reassure you that these three Js help illustrate different dimensions of ‘unanswered prayer’ and ‘God knows best’ and it’s not my intention to give the full lecture on the topic!

The book of Job is, I think, one of the best – and hardest – books of the bible. It tackles absolutely head on the problem of innocent suffering and offers some of the most moving writing on the human condition and response to suffering. But in today’s context, it also provides probably the most powerful insights into why and how God knows best. As I’m sure you know, the book of Job starts v1 with the presentation of Job as a man who was ‘blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.’ He was also a wealthy man but used his wealth to help others. Even God himself presents him as a just and honourable person v8 ‘have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’

Then Job becomes the object of a debate between God and Satan, in which Satan is adamant that Job's innocence and faith comes from the blessings which God has given to him and if they are taken away Job will curse God – v11 'put forth thy hand now and touch all that he has and he will curse thee to thy face.' But God is convinced that whatever happens to Job, still Job will not curse God, so he says to Satan v12 'behold all that he has is in your power, only upon himself do not put forth your hand'. So all manner of suffering is wrought on Job's family and all his possessions are lost. But Job's response v 21 demonstrates God's faith in him 'Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' Then, v23 'in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.'

So Satan has another go and wants to inflict suffering on Job himself as he is sure that Job will then curse God. So God says v6 'behold he is in your power, only spare his life'. So Job is affected terrible sores and goes to sit among the ashes, where first his wife comes and tells him to curse God and then, famously, his three friends – Job's comforters. And Job curses the day he was born but still does not curse God. The next thirty or so chapters of the book contain the discourses of the three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar as they try to justify Job's suffering. These really are wonderful passages and I thoroughly recommend that you read them. Between them the three friends try to cover all the reasons for what has happened to Job, it was his fault, it was the fault of his children, that he is guilty of hubris in saying that 'his doctrine is pure and he is clean in God's eyes.' Then Elihu turns up and offers his two pennyworth – ch 32 vv2-3: he was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God, he was angry also at Job's three friends because they

had found no answer although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. And there follow five poems giving different justifications for Job's situation.

Finally, in ch 38 in the words that Jane read for us, we hear God's response. Job is answered by a direct encounter with God. God knows best – he asks Job to question him and he will answer face to face. Then as Job refuses to challenge him, God again encourages him 'will you condemn me that you may be justified'. And finally ch 42 v1-11 Job recognises the privilege of his encounter with God, God really does know best: 'I know that thou canst do all things, that no purpose of thine can be thwarted. I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.'

The whole book of Job is a meditation on dealing with disappointment and Job realises the answer is in the face to face encounter with God himself – God knows best. And at the end of the book, God restores to Job all his worldly wealth and blesses him with an extensive family.

A second perspective on this theme of God knows best can be seen in the book of Jonah, another of my personal favourites. Yet in this book, the context could not be more different. In brief, here is the essence of the book. God asks Jonah to preach against the city of Nineveh because of their wickedness. But Jonah runs away and hides on a ship. God causes a great tempest and the sailors throw Jonah overboard because they think he is responsible as he is fleeing God. Jonah is swallowed by the whale where he spends three days and three nights and is then spat out. So God sends Jonah a second time. This time he goes and as a result of his preaching, the people repent and become faithful to God, so God saw how they responded and did not harm them.

Jonah's reaction is striking – ch 4 v1 'but it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry.' And he berates God, saying effectively, I knew this is what would happen which is why I didn't go to preach against them as I knew they would repent and you would have mercy. I wanted them to get the judgement that they were due! So Jonah asks God 'therefore o lord, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' Then Jonah goes out of the city and sulks. God then creates a plant to give shade to Jonah and he was glad of it. The next day, God creates a worm to destroy the plant and then a sultry wind and hot sun so Jonah is close to fainting. And Jonah again asks to die. To which God gives his response – in many ways very similar to Job: v10: 'and the Lord said, you pity the plant for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?'

The answer is the same – God knows best. God is personally involved, personally committed and present in person. This is the vision that we heard in our second reading from Revelation; v3 'God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'

So the examples of Job and Jonah illustrate the ways in which God knows best, in which God is present to them. But there is another dimension of prayer which is created by the sense of the absence of God. If Job and Jonah are reassured and nurtured, find refreshment in the presence of God, what about the anguish and torment and suffering of believing that one is abandoned by God, or that in spite of your seeking you cannot find God. This dialectic of presence and absence, the delight in experiencing God's presence, and the

searing, aching longing for God is wonderfully captured in the writings of the mystics, especially St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. John is perhaps best known for his meditation on the long dark night of the soul – reflections on this torment of longing for and seeking God’s presence but yet not finding it, following on to the delight and wonder of finally encountering God. In a series of poems and then in a very detailed commentary on those poems, John of the Cross gives a sublime insight into the heaven and hell of prayerfully seeking and finding the light of Christ.

A couple of verses from one of his poems, roughly translated:

I live without living, as I fear I am dying because I do not die. I don’t live any more as without God I cannot live, since without him what is life. A thousand deaths I suffer as my own life I hope to lose as I am dying because I do not die.

I really do recommend these poems as in many ways John’s experience is perhaps closest to what we may experience as faithful, prayerful Christians. I’m not sure any of us would have the audacity of Jonah in challenging and refusing to do what God asks, or the patience of Job. But I do think that the writings of the mystics offer rich support and comfort for that ‘long dark night of the soul’.

So what are we to make of this theme, of coping with unanswered prayer, dealing with disappointment? Is it enough for us that ‘God knows best’? Is that a sufficiently satisfactory answer? Do we respond more like Job’s comforters, coming up with all different kinds of rationalisation for the situation? Or do we have the patience of Job himself? I don’t know about you, but I think that the constant tension between absence and presence, of feeling close to god and then at times feeling so far away is actually quite familiar. The

long dark night of the soul is at times a fairly accurate description of how we may feel. But what I think should reassure us from these three very different examples, is that God is always there for us, it is not that he abandons us, rather it is we that leave him behind. He is ever present. We may think that our prayers are unanswered, but often that can be because our time is not God's time, or how we think of an 'answer' is not how God answers us.

There is that joke about the man trying to save himself as the flood waters rise, first a fallen tree passes right by him but he says he is praying to God and God will save him, then an upturned boat passes by but he says he is praying to God and God will save him; finally a helicopter passes overhead but he waves it away saying he is praying to God and God will save him. At that point the heavens open and a loud voice cries out, I've sent you a tree, a boat and now a helicopter, what more do you want?!?

As the book of Job describes so eloquently, God's ways are not our ways, our understanding is, in that sense, so limited. As the book of Jonah demonstrates, God's mercy, compassion and forgiveness are so much greater than anything we can imagine. We may think that our prayers are unanswered, we may feel disappointed, we may feel alone, abandoned by God, but the real truth is that God is there for us, present, welcoming and refreshing us. Always.

Heavenly father, be with us this morning and every morning. Help us to feel the warmth of your presence, give us the time, the patience and the understanding to recognise you in the crooks and crannies of our busy lives. Help us to know you are here so we may experience that joy of communion with you and that reassurance of your saving love. Today and always, Amen.