

The story of Job in the Old Testament tackles one of the very biggest question we might ask.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why should we suffer in a way that seems out of proportion to anything wrong we may have done?

The book of Job speaks into that question.

If you are not familiar with the book- here is a brief outline.

It's very hard to say when it was written, but it's quite logical to think it was written in its present form at the time of the exile of the Israelites to Babylon some hundreds of years before Christ. That generation would be questioning their suffering and asking 'where is God in our suffering?' It makes sense that this story would be a means of addressing that big question.

It's a story.

Job is the most righteous of righteous men. Not only does he live a blameless life, he's humble enough to know he might sin in a way he doesn't comprehend so he offers sacrifices for that and his whole family.

As the story develops, God is in heaven and Satan (which is a translation of The Accuser) appears. God points to Job as a righteous man and The Accuser – accuses. Dripping with sarcasm, the accuser says "Of course Job is righteous – anybody and everybody would be righteous if you reward them" – because Job was very wealthy with flocks and herd and camels and donkeys. So God allows Satan to sweep all that away. In a darkly comic fashion in chapter 1, Job loses everything – wealth, children EVERYTHING in one dreadful day.

This is Job's response...

'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'

The earlier scene repeats, with Satan coming to heaven and God pointing to Job's righteousness. Satan is unimpressed – skin for skin he says...if his health is removed, then we shall see what true colours Job has....so God allows Job to be physically inflicted.

By this time – Job's wife has had enough...

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' ¹⁰ But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

The story develops from there with Job's three friends turning up. If you have ever heard the phrase "Job's comforters" used in a sardonic way...it's this very story. To begin with they remain silent and just sit with Job (so far so good) then they start to speak and it goes downhill from there.

Job's comforters have a very simple theology that makes sense of why people suffer.

Job must have done something sinful. It's all Job's fault. That's the way they see things and it's very logical.

1. God is Almighty and nothing happens without God being Sovereign over it.
2. God is just. He wouldn't punish and wound where it wasn't deserved therefore
3. Job must have done something wrong. Ta Da!!

If you think you've heard that theology before (the answer as to why people suffer) you have....there's a story in the gospel of John. The disciples see a blind man and say to Jesus – who sinned? This man or his parents???

In other words...the punishment of blindness...whose sin was it?

This simple theology is very very widespread today, not least because it's central to Hindu and Buddhist thought, it's known as Karma.

If you're having a bad time...it's your own fault for something you did wrong in this life OR a previous life.

Of course all simple theology is quite attractive because it is simple and black and white. If you are suffering – it's your fault.

But as a Reader of the story we see something else happening. We KNOW Job is a righteous man, we know he's suffering but it's not his fault...he seems caught up in a conflict between God and Satan...and there's our first clue.

The accuser is seeking to drive an irreconcilable wedge between humankind and God. If Satan can prove that the only reason anyone would have faith is to secure health and wealth and well-being...then clearly no-one would have a genuine faith.

Our faith would be self-serving and therefore not really faith at all. What the author of Job is saying through this book, is that when faith is expressed by those who suffer...it is the most precious of gifts to God.

Job has every reason to curse God and die and yet in the greatest depth of suffering he responds. I know my Redeemer lives, and even when this body has died yet I will live and see him with my own eyes.

Such expressions of faith are of immense value....simply because they are not through any answered prayer or reward...but what someone truly believes. They hold onto the truth of God's goodness, fairness, justice and kindness even when there does not appear to be evidence of it.

When we are suffering...it can be hard to hold onto the certainties we once had. This is echoed in the Psalms, where the psalmist laments how he used to go with the crowds to the temple, he used to lead people in worship...but now his soul is downcast.

We see it too in the life of John the Baptist...he is brought to our attention by today's second reading. The last of the prophets, the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus. His preaching was direct and dramatic. He preached a message of repentance of sins and living a life that demonstrated that repentance, living simply, honestly and treating others fairly.

Yet when he was arrested and thrown in prison he had doubts...and sent his disciples to ask Jesus – are you really the Messiah?

If John the Baptist can have doubts when suffering...it's not surprising that we might too. How then are we to view suffering? Certainly not with a simplistic and erroneous theology that it's somehow all your own fault.

Perhaps in this way. St. Paul teaches us that suffering is not meaningless, but in God's hands can become a pathway to a deeper and richer experience of Grace. This is Romans 5 from The Message

5 ¹We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the

wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

³⁻⁵ There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling short-changed. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

God didn't create a world of sickness, suffering and pain. The world is not the way God intended it to be, but he is not aloof and remote from it either. Into the unjust suffering he sent His Son to correct wrong views about God the Father and to reveal a future where justice shall restore all things. So we live by faith and with joyful hope looking for Christ to return and working toward that day.

What though shall we take from today?

Perhaps a renewed desire that our faith might be seen more clearly in those times when we are suffering...and a deeper compassion and willingness to draw close to those who are suffering.

In God's hands, suffering can produce perseverance and hope and refine our faith... and we should never hesitate to pray that God would relieve and bring his comfort to those who suffer.

(Note. The congregation was invited to pause for a moment after communion and light a candle as an act of prayer for those known to them who are suffering)