

Text: Job 3

Theme: Lamentations of Job

Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during Holy Communion Service on 10/06/2018 at 10.30am

Introduction

We have to admit that if we can see that there is a good outcome to suffering it helps us to endure it better - like a woman going through childbirth, for instance. In the Christian life, however, we are not always permitted to know the reason why. But we are still called to trust God who knows why.

We have watched the loneliness of Job. Now we listen to his loneliness. Chapter 3 is a soliloquy. Job is not speaking here to anybody. He is not speaking to his friends; the cycles of speeches begin with Eliphaz in chapter 4. He is just speaking, with himself but I suppose with a view that God hears.

Job asks why - why is light given, why is death not given, why. As we look back from this side of Calvary, we see in Job's question the words of another, who cried 'My God, my God, why...?' Because of the abandoned one, we are never alone, as he stands with us as we suffer. As one modern song puts it: 'I'm forgiven because you were forsaken, I'm accepted, you were condemned... Amazing love, how can it be, that you my king should die for me!'

Traditional Jewish and Christian worshippers fantasise on Job's faith. This is not surprising, for Job's faith here is very wonderful. But the danger with our focusing on 1:21 and 2:10 is that we make Job's faith two-dimensional. "He suffered; he trusted," we say, "and so should we. End of story." But it is far from the end of the story, for in 3:1 he curses the day of his birth. And we are brought up short, for Job then goes on lamenting and protesting chapter after chapter. We must not soften this. We must remember that at the end of the book God affirms that Job has spoken rightly of him (42:7), that Job is God's servant, that Job is a righteous man (who can therefore pray and expect his prayers to be heard). The despair of Job 3 is the authentic experience of a man affirmed by God at the start (1:8; 2:3) and affirmed again by God at the end (42:7). We need to remember that. It is very surprising, for Job 3 is a dark chapter.

I believe we must learn from this chapter that God does not hold it against us if, in our suffering, we vent our feelings to him, that we cry to him, or even shout at him if necessary, so unloading the emotional pain on to him. That is what Job does in this chapter 3.

After the relatively passive reaction to the news of his children's death - which is often the case in bereavement, a numbness and disbelief which is part of the body's natural mechanism for coping - there follows his deep emotional outburst. While not sinning by cursing God, Job does not hesitate to curse the day he was born. So anguished is he that he feels he must tell someone, and who better to tell than God? And you know from a pastoral point of view it is vital that people who are undergoing pain do not bottle up their feelings, for if that happens all the energy simply gets pushed down into the subconscious, only to show itself later, either in depression or in a nervous stress. Far better to let the grief come out.

We must realise that there is an irreducible element of mystery in all suffering. Job cried out: 'Why?'; 'Why didn't I perish at birth?'; 'Why was I not stillborn?'; 'Why is light given to those in misery?' And yet Job is never given the answers. Although we as readers are allowed to have insight into what is going on in heaven, Job is not. He is never made aware of the discussion between God and Satan. Now that is important, because one of the lessons this

book is teaching is the need to trust God in situations when we do not know why certain things are happening. But let it be said that this faith is not blind faith. Job knew about God, he had reasons to believe that God is all powerful and all good, and he is reminded of these things later when he encounters God as described in chapters 38-42. Therefore, although Job did not know why these things were happening to him, he did know enough about God to know why he trusted him who did know why. The fact that Job didn't get an answer didn't stop him from asking, and neither should it stop us.

1. A Curse (3:3-10)

Job's outburst begins with a carefully crafted curse. Job "cursed the day of his birth" (v.1). He does not curse God, as the Satan has said he would (1:11; 2:5) and as his wife exhorts him to do (2:9). But he comes right to the brink of doing this.

In verses 3-10 he expands on this to give a comprehensive curse on his very existence. Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, "A man is conceived." (v.3).

Job piles up words for darkness and pours them onto the day of his birth.

"Let that day be darkness!" he says. Let it never have come into existence as a day. "May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it" (v. 4). For God to "seek" or pay attention to something is for it to be a place or time where God is present in his life-giving power. The New Jerusalem will be "called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken" (Isaiah 62: 12).

This is terrible. In normal life almost nothing can rival conception and birth as signs of hope. A wife tells us she is expecting a baby, and we rejoice. Or we ought to. Her position is quite literally pregnant with hope.

But for Job it has all gone into the negative. All he sees is a No Entry sign to the future. "If only I had never been." "What are you looking forward to, Job?" "Nothing." If he tries to look forward, all he can see is a blank wall of hopelessness as his affections and longings are turned back upon themselves in despair. "There is no future for me; would that there had been no past." Here is bitter memory unsweetened by hope.

2. A Lament (vv.11-19)

And so Job's pointless ineffective curse merges into a desperate lament. This lament is carefully structured in two parts. Each part begins with the question "Why?" and ends with the description of the place of the dead (v.11) Each of these parts helps us to understand the other. Part I is found in verses 11-15.

Verse 16 echoes verses 11, 12, with essentially the same question: "Why, if I had to be born, could I not have been stillborn and never see the light of life? I wish I had gone straight from the womb to Sheol,?"

So in verses 14, 15 it is not that Job particularly wants to be with the kings, counselors, and princes. After all, among them will no doubt be the Sabean and Chaldean chieftains who ravaged his property. Rather he believes that in Sheol at last they will no longer be able to cause him trouble.

Verse 23.

Two things to immediately remember. First, Job speaks of 'a man whose way is hidden' (v23). This could either mean hidden from God, or hidden from himself. Hidden from God, because God doesn't seem to care anymore, God seems to be absent, distant, unconcerned. Yet if it is hidden from himself - if his way is hidden and unknown, then here is the very essence of the believer's walk: we walk by faith, and not by sight - we don't know what is around the corner - otherwise it would be sight, and not faith. It is only through the hiddenness, through

the afflictions, that our faith is tested and proved. The very fact that we have light and life is the proof that God has not finished with us, that we continue by faith.

But the second, is to remember God's verdict of Job. God speaks of 'my servant Job' in the first chapter (1:8, 2:3), and again in chapter 42 when he tells the friends 'For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.' (42:8). **Job's outpouring is not counted as sin, and Job's salvation is not in doubt - even the secure saints may have the dark night of the soul, while being firmly held in the hand of the Lord.**

In verses 24-26 there is a great emphasis on what "comes" upon Job. His sighing "comes" to him (v.24a); his groanings "are poured out" over him like water (v. 24b); what he fears "comes" upon him, and what he dreads "befalls" him (v.25). He has no rest, but trouble "comes" (v.26). He is the target. These things are the reality of his experience. But he does not, and cannot, know why. This is the source of his deep unease. He knows that God is the author, and he knows that these things have come to him. But why?

Verse 26 is the final summation of his current complaint - where his life is declared to be the exact opposite of how he imagines the grave.

So what do you say to Job? How do we deal with his words here in chapter three, as the flood of despair is unleashed after the week of silence? Do you want to run up to him and say 'don't worry Job, all's well - we know how it turns out?' Our advice to keep praying and keep trusting seems almost trite in the face of what he has said. From our privileged position in watching Job we have two advantages - we know how it will end up, and we also know about the discussion in heaven, but Job knows neither part. He is in the middle of it all, saying what he sees. So, the answer to some "why questions" are locked up in the heavenlies and only to those the Spirit of God reveals it.

3. The Good News in Job 3

We know if we are Christians that for every believer the best is yet to be. Always there are better things ahead; always there is hope, because the future is God's future, and our destiny is glory. But we need to recognize that there may be times in the life of a believer when that future appears utterly blank and all we can do is look back with regret, consumed with "if only." That is where Job is in Job 3. It is a bleak time. So where is the gospel, the good news in Job 3? It is not very obvious, but it is there in three ways.

Even in the Darkness Job Cannot Avoid God

Right here in the depth of his misery he knows he has to deal with God. We shall see as the book unfolds that this is a great theme in his journey.

Job's Restlessness Is a Paradoxical Sign of Hope

We have seen that the dominant tone of chapter 3 is restlessness. Although he says he has no hope, his restlessness betrays him. If there really is no hope, there is no point asking "Why?" (v.20). And yet Job does ask "Why?" and he asks it repeatedly and energetically. He says he wants to die, but his restless words betray him, for they point inexorably to life and resurrection.

Job's Darkness Anticipates a Deeper Darkness

At the end of Job 3 we leave Job terribly alone, sitting with friends who want to comfort him but have nothing to say. We leave him able only to look back with bitter regrets that he ever lived, mired in deep darkness. Is there anything that can be said to him?

I believe there is; even at this stage there is something to be said, beyond the silence of bankruptcy, beyond even the silence of sympathy. We saw when considering 2:11-13 that

Job's loneliness foreshadowed a greater loneliness. His darkness likewise anticipates a deeper darkness. Two thousand years ago another blameless believer was in deep darkness, hanging on a cross at midday. Deeper than the darkness of night. Deeper even than Job's darkness. And from his lips came the cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33, 34). **In some strange way, because Job's darkness of soul foreshadows the darkness of the cross there is within it hope of rescue. Have you come to the cross to experience the hope and life that Christ's death gives?**