

Text: Job 1-2

Theme: The Suffering of the Innocent

Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 03/06/2018 at 10.30am

Introduction

Let me bring this to your awareness. Over 15,000 Nigerian Christians have lost their lives while in an act of worship in their churches in the past ten years due to Moslem insurgency! How about countless Christians who suffered the same fate in Egypt, Pakistan, Syria, North Korea to name just a few countries. It is like we are reliving the atrocities of Holocaust when adults and children alike were killed senselessly. We have to admit that such suffering does not make sense. We can see a connection between certain forms of behaviour and the suffering they bring, for example, sexual promiscuity and venereal disease. But what possible connection could there be in terms of cause and effect to account for the appalling atrocities undergone by the Jews during the Holocaust? One of the most cruel methods – and by far the most notorious – was gassing. This took place in an industrialised fashion in six so-called extermination camps, of which Auschwitz-Birkenau is the best known. These six camps together claimed around 3 million Jewish lives.

As we contemplate the holocaust in all its naked evil, can we honestly believe that all those children tortured by the Nazis were not in a very real sense innocent sufferers? Perhaps of all the books in the Bible associated with the question of senseless suffering is the book of Job.

In its pages the writer raises the perplexing question which is on the lips of so many: **If God is good why are things so bad?** If we are to allow the full emotive import of this poetic melodrama to have its effect on us, we must try putting ourselves into Job's shoes, to empathise with the very real, heartfelt cries that his unjust suffering evokes.

The book deals with the practical 'how' questions, that is, how are we to think and speak of God when we suffer? How can we face up to the fact that we live in a broken, fallen world which means that no matter how good we are, things are going to cross our path which will hurt us and those we love?

This book is part of what is called 'wisdom literature', and wisdom is all about how to live life and negotiate its challenges wisely, including the challenge of enduring intolerable pain. This is one of the main purpose of the book of Job- to help us know why we can trust God who knows why, even when we don't.

The book focuses on an individual- Job, because that is how we have to deal with suffering as an *individual* experience. It is also significant that with the possible exception of one character, none of the others, including Job, are Jewish so pointing to the fact, this is the experience anyone can have. What is more, reading the forty odd chapters of Job and his critics going back and forth in accusation and defence can seem interminable but isn't that just what it is like when you are in the midst of anguished suffering, it just seems to go on and on with no end in sight?

In the book's first two chapters we are introduced to Job and engage with three subjects:

- 1. When bad things happen to good people**
- 2. How to think and speak of God in suffering**
- 3. The loneliness of Job and what Job foreshadows**

1. When bad things happen to good people (1:1-19; 2:1-7)

Job lived at a time when a person's wealth was measured not in terms of the size of his bank balance but the size of his herds. This would place him in the period of the Hebrew patriarchs, men like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, we are told he lived in Uz, somewhere in the Arabian desert but unlike Abraham is not given a family tree and so he is being put forward as a representative of humanity as a whole, and not specifically as an Israelite.

His deep personal piety showed itself in several ways, not least in his passionate concern for the spiritual well-being of his children. In verses 4-5 we read that just in case his sons and daughters had behaved in a way that might have offended God and brought down his judgement upon them, Job went out of his way to make sacrifices for their sin on their behalf.

Making proper arrangements for them is one thing, going over the top and worrying about them and trying to run their lives is another. And as our world seems to become more unpredictable being able to trust in the God who holds the future in his hands will become more important for us.

But without doubt on a relative scale of values Job does stand head and shoulders above everyone else as affirmed by God himself in verse 8 **-he is blameless in character and upright in action. So, here we have a sincere worshipper of God, an honest hard-working businessman, a loving husband and thoughtful father who is second to none; in fact, Job almost appears to be too good to be true.**

So what could go wrong? This is when the scene switches to the unseen heavenly court where an angelic being called the 'Satan' comes into God's presence. **The word 'Satan' is not a proper name like 'James', it is a description of the Creature's role; it is a word which means 'accuser' or 'prosecutor'.** Like a vindictive lawyer or a corrupt policeman with an obsession to frame the innocent, Satan is on the lookout for someone to drag before the judgement seat of God in order to condemn.

God says to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answers, 'From roaming throughout the earth and going to and fro in it.' Then God asks Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil',

Satan, in effect, replies: 'The only reason why Job behaves as he does is because he knows on which side his bread is buttered. He is religious and moral only because of what he can get out of it. **What we are to note is that the angelic barrister does not accuse Job of doing anything wrong, except maybe having dubious motives for living a godly life;** rather it is God who is being harangued for setting up a phony arrangement amongst human beings by blessing righteous behaviour with rewards, and this, the Satan argues, hampers true righteousness.

The assumption is that real righteousness involves doing good and honouring God for their own sake, not because of what we might get out of them.? This is the first charge levelled against God, (1:9-11): 'Does Job fear God for nothing? . . . Have you not put a hedge around him and his household? You have blessed the work of his hands . . . but stretch out your hand and strike everything he has got and he will curse you' '

Accordingly, Satan challenges God: 'Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face' (verse 11). And shocking though it may seem, God takes up the challenge and actually gives Satan permission to do his worst, with one proviso - he is not to harm Job himself 'The LORD said to Satan, **"Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger"** ' (verses 11-12).

That is precisely what happened. In what has all the ingredients of a screaming nightmare, Job's life is totally devastated. First, he loses his wealth to marauding bandits. Gone are his oxen needed for farming, gone are his donkeys and camels needed for transport, and all his workers are massacred (verses 14-15). His financial empire lies in ruins. And just as he may have been consoling himself with the thought that bad though as that is, he could just manage to scrape a living together with the few sheep he had left, news reached him that these too had been destroyed, not by an act of man this time but by an act of God: 'The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and your servants' (verse 16). Maybe it was a volcanic eruption we don't really know. But while still reeling from the shock waves of economic catastrophe, news of an even greater personal tragedy comes to his ears - a storm has taken the lives of his dear children (verses 18-19).

2. How to Think and Speak of God in Suffering (Job 1: 20-22; 2:8-10)

How would we have responded to all of that? Well this is Job's response: 'At this Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head [signs of intense grief and mourning]. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: **'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.'** Then we read: **'In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing** (verses 20-22).

We may think that that would be enough for any man to bear. But God apparently thought differently. For, as the veil is lifted once more in chapter 2, we find ourselves in the heavenly court yet again, only to discover the wager being taken one stage further. Satan, still not convinced that there is not a base ulterior motive for Job's faith, pursues his challenge in verses 4-5: 'Skin for skin! A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones and he will surely curse you to your face.' In other words, 'Get under Job's skin, God, let him feel some *physical* suffering; let him think that his own life is threatened, and then watch him reveal his true colours.'

So Job is afflicted with boils of such excruciating pain that his wife, finding it unbearable to watch, urges Job to commit voluntary euthanasia by cursing God (verse 9). So disfigured and ruined is Job that when his friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar arrive to console him, they hardly recognise him and break down in uncontrollable weeping, it was that bad (2:11-13). Their not "recognizing" him was a painful thing for them, but no doubt it was also a painful thing for him.'? No longer could there be the old natural friendly embrace, the hug or handshake, the smiles of friendship rekindled, the delighted warmth of welcome into his home. Instead they did not "recognize" him. They found themselves behaving toward him as to a stranger.

"And they raised their voices and wept" (v. 12). Weeping here is not the shedding of silent tears. It is "the sound of ... weeping" (Psalm 6:8), something done with the mouth as well as the eyes.

3. The Loneliness of Job and what Job Foreshadows (2:11-13)

Job has torn his robe in mourning (1 :20), and they too tear theirs. And they "sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven" (v. 12).³ Dust speaks of mortality and death. "And they sat with him on the ground" (v. 13).

Then came silence, seven days and seven nights of silence! "They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." Job's suffering was, as we shall see, deeper than merely physical

What are we to make of this silence? Some Bible commentators say that this long silence was the best thing that they did. And certainly, as we shall see in chapter 4, when they begin to speak they do no good at all. Whatever the meaning of their silence, the book of Job brings home to us the loneliness of suffering.

Job in his awesome aloneness foreshadows another believer, an even greater man who endures an even deeper suffering. This believer too was with his dearest friends, in a garden outside Jerusalem. He told them to sit and wait while he prayed. He took with him his three closest friends "and began to be greatly distressed and troubled." He said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." He went on a little farther, fell on the ground, and prayed "with loud cries and tears." But when he came back he found them sleeping. "Could you not watch one hour?" he asked sadly.

But in the deepest intensity of his suffering he cried out in anguish, "My God, my God, why, have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). As the old hymn puts it, "He bore the burden to Calvary, and suffered and died alone,?"

There is a deep sense in which the lonely sufferings of Jesus Christ mean that no believer today is called to enter Job's loneliness in its full depth. However alone the believer may feel today, the reality is that he or she is not ultimately alone as Job was.

Nor is the suffering of the believer a result of sin always. The desire to link sin to suffering is so strong that Jesus dealt with the issue at least twice. "As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus" (John 9:1–3). The disciples made the mistake of assuming that the innocent would never suffer and assigned personal guilt to the blind man (or to his parents). Jesus corrected their thinking, saying, "This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (verse 3). The man's blindness was not the result of personal sin; rather, God had a higher purpose for the suffering.

Job could not find answers to his suffering because he was not privy to the events in heaven. So we should be careful to jump into conclusions as we seek to find answers to every calamity that befalls a person. It is human nature to try to find a correlation between bad behaviour and bad circumstances and, conversely, between good behaviour and blessings, but in our humanity, we should let God be God.

Lest we start to think that the Satan is still showing up his face in God's court, listen to what Revelation 12:7-12 says. The victory of Jesus over sin and the Satan has won for us a heavenly privilege.

"And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, ..." (Revelation 12:7-12)

As a result of the victory of the cross, the Satan is no longer present in the council of God, as he was in Job 1, 2, to accuse believers before the Father. He has been thrown down to earth. He no longer has access to the throne room of Heaven. What does this mean, since he is still dangerous, ranges the earth and sea with great anger, and indeed can only be conquered by those who "loved not their lives even unto death" (v. 11)? The key truth is that he who was "the accuser of our brothers" is no longer able to accuse Christian believers

before God (v. 10). He accuses us, and we need to learn what to do with his accusation. But when he accuses us, God is not listening. The devil no longer has that access. The issue of our justification has been decisively settled at the cross. This is the gospel truth of the cross: there is no longer any condemnation (Romans 8: 1), and our consciences have been cleansed by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 9: 14).

So, as we read the story of Job we think first and primarily of the greater story of Jesus, who walked the way of Job for us, who plumbed the depths of Job's suffering for us, and who was vindicated for us. Satan is still able to attack us, and he spends what short life is left to him angrily doing that, like a hungry lion on the prowl. We must be realistic about this. Still we have to endure ("Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints," Revelation 13: 10). But if we are in Christ, the Satan is no longer able to accuse us before God. He no longer has that access.