

Job's Suffering

Boxing Day, 26th December, was a Sunday in 2004. I remember a very pleasant Sunday service for those of us who were around over the Christmas period. We sang a few more Christmas carols, thanked God for a lovely Christmas Day and went home to enjoy our Boxing Day lunches.

News of what was happening on the other side of the world at that very moment only started leaking out on Boxing Day afternoon. Two minutes before one o'clock in the morning, our time, the third largest earthquake ever recorded on a seismograph had occurred on the sea bed off Sumatra. It triggered a series of tsunamis up to 30 metres high which inundated the coasts of most landmasses bordering the Indian ocean most especially in Indonesia and Thailand. And by the time we were happily gathering for our Boxing Day service 230,000 people in 14 countries were dead.

All kinds of people perished that day. Wealthy westerners having a Christmas holiday by the beach – 149 British people died. But the biggest group by far were the poor. Poor fishermen and others from Banda Aceh to Sri Lanka forced to live more or less at the high tide line who had no chance.

Not surprisingly the question of innocent suffering soon arose in the media. There were those who tried to say that it was effectively a man made disaster. We hadn't got a proper Pacific tsunami warning system going. We had destroyed coral reefs, and coastal forests which would have diffused the wave's power. Injustice had forced those poor fishermen to live so close to danger. We had forgotten ancient wisdom which advised fleeing to high ground when an earthquake was felt. But was it really all our fault? Could God be so easily absolved?

The far more clamorous and penetrating cry was about God. How could God allow such a thing to happen? Especially how could he be so indiscriminate? Children were especially vulnerable to that monstrous tidal surge.

This cry is not new. In 1775 another earthquake off the coast of Portugal destroyed 80% of the city of Lisbon. The earthquake struck at 9.40am on an important Catholic holiday so enormous numbers were in the cathedral which collapsed and killed them. In the eighteenth century there was a popular Christian view that though there was suffering in the world, God must have made the world as good as he could have done. So "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

The atheist philosopher Voltaire was outraged by this superficial dismissal of the reality of suffering. He wrote a "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" which began

Oh, miserable mortals! Oh wretched earth!
Oh, dreadful assembly of all mankind!
Eternal sermon of useless sufferings!
Deluded philosophers who cry, "All is well,"
Hasten, contemplate these frightful ruins,
This wreck, these shreds, these wretched ashes of the dead;
These women and children heaped on one another,

These scattered members under broken marble;

Voltaire's visceral cry exposed the facile superficiality of much Christian teaching of the day and drove many towards atheism.

And it happens still today. Sometimes it is the great disaster which does it. But more often it is a more personal catastrophe. I well remember a beautiful young girl in a youth group I helped run. She was called Mandy Peters. One day Mandy was crossing a busy road and was knocked down and killed. At her funeral her father said that he had been wondering whether there might be a God of love, but not now. If there was a God he was a cruel malevolent sadist, and he would rather be an atheist than contemplate a God like that.

And I know that together we could recount hundreds of stories like that. Indeed some would be our own stories, our own pain, our own questions, our own anger, our own doubt.

Actually the painful reality of innocent suffering is one of our culture's biggest objections to the Christian God. Indeed to the idea of God in general. Sceptics before and after Voltaire have mocked much Christian teaching as hopelessly out of touch. Often, in my view, rightly.

But over the next few weeks I want to try to show you that the Bible itself is not out of touch, it is not superficial, it is not blind to the realities of life. Indeed I want to try to persuade you that it gives the only fully satisfying answer to the perennial cry of the human heart in the face of suffering – WHY?

But it is not going to be quite the answer we expect. And I am afraid you are going to have to wait for that answer to slowly unfold over the coming weeks as we look at this most challenging and most extraordinary book of Job.

Today we must just introduce to Job, his plight, and his God.

There is an awful lot we don't know about the book of Job. We don't know the author – he never declares himself. We don't know the date either of the book or of Job's life itself. We don't actually know for certain that Job was a historical figure. It begins rather like a fairy tale.

Job 1:1-3

Uz is a land to the east of the river Jordan but no one is quite sure where it was. The use of the numbers 7 and 3 also sounds rather idealised since these were numbers of completeness in ancient Israel.

And there is no reason why we should insist that Job is a historical figure. Some parts of the Bible are undoubtedly written as history but the bible also includes parables. This could be an extended parable. Written to teach us vital truths as Jesus used parables.

However this kind of introduction often introduces historical figures in the Old Testament and he is mentioned as a hero of the faith in the book of Ezekiel. It seems

more likely that Job is a real historical figure. However details of Job's situation are not as important as the timeless issues that the book explores with relentless persistence. The book is not so much a history book as a piece of wisdom literature which probes and probes at this central conundrum – why do the innocent suffer?

The first thing that the book establishes is Job's innocence. If Job has sinned in some way and God is punishing him then there is no fundamental problem. God is just and must punish sin. But Job has not sinned.

➤ *Job's Contribution to his Suffering*

○ *Nothing*

Job's contribution to his suffering is precisely zero.

📖 **Job 1:1b**

Neither is the calamity that is about to befall his children their just punishment. Job has performed the necessary sacrifices to secure their forgiveness.

📖 **Job 1:4-5**

We couldn't have it clearer. This is about innocent suffering. Job doesn't claim to be totally innocent as we will see next week. But the standard Christian argument that "all have sinned" and therefore we all deserve however much trouble God might choose to send to us just will not wash with Job. It may at a theological level be true. The fact that we don't suffer constant trials and calamities is due to God's mercy on us because even the sins of the most innocent person are enough to merit eternal punishment. All that is true. But Job insists it is not enough. It may be that no one is totally innocent but his question is this: Why visit suffering on the relatively innocent? Blanket assertions of our universal guilt will not make question go away.

But then this book sets the scene in another way. It also looks at God's contribution to Job's suffering.

➤ *God's Contribution to Job's Suffering*

○ *God is sovereign*

God is very emphatically portrayed as the ruler of his creation. He sits in a heavenly court. Satan – whom we will look at in a moment - along with all the angels must present themselves before God.

📖 **Job 1:6**

There is no hint that anything happens behind God's back, or outside of his control. Everything that happens to Job happens by God's permission.

This immediately rules out of court many of the standard old solutions to the problem of evil. Many people's historically have been polytheists partly because it is a simple solution to our confusions. What more straightforward answer than to imagine various

gods, engaged in an endless soap opera of intrigue and conflict which results in all kinds of chaos in the visible world. From the beginning the bible has insisted that this will not do – there is only one God.

Other philosophies have been dualistic – imagining a constant battle between a good God and an evil one. However the bible is not dualistic. It insists that the world is under the sovereign hand of a good God. That evil is an incongruity in our good world which will one day be defeated. A dualistic world only offers no hope, only eternal conflict of good and evil. The Bible is not dualistic. It says that the good God will win.

A popular solution in the last few hundred years has been deism. Deism says that God is good, and perhaps ultimately in control, but he is so distant that he has lost control of day to day events.

It is a very attractive solution. I remember talking to a veterinary friend, Richard, years ago about his son who had died from a bug my friend had brought home from work. He was consumed by guilt, but more than that by the question of how God could have allowed it. A well meaning minister had told him that God didn't get involved in controlling which bacteria came home on his overalls.

But that is meagre comfort. It may remove some of the sting of our questions about God, but it leaves us horribly alone in the universe. If God was not in any way sovereign over the death of Richard's son, then actually all the blame fell on Richard.

The bible will not allow that. God sees the details of Job's life. He will say to Satan "look at my servant Job" (v8). And he is absolutely in control of the details of Job's fate. This is not an out of touch deistic God.

But for all that God is portrayed as sovereign over Job's suffering we must balance that with another truth.

- *Evil is real though not sovereign*

And here evil is personified in the person of Satan – the Devil.

 **Job 1:6**

Satan or the Devil is portrayed in the Bible as a fallen angel. A spiritual being who chose evil and becomes the head of all the forces of evil opposed to God.

And he has some freedom.

 **Job 1:7**

He is utterly cynical about human beings.

 **Job 1:9-11**

And he has some power. His name is Satan – which means the Accuser. And his power lies in his ability to bring accusations against before the God of justice. But this accusation, God is convinced, is false.

Nevertheless the potential force of the accusation confers a certain power on Satan.

 **Job 1:12**

So in verses 13-19 we learn of his loss of his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, and then his children.

Job continues to worship God so Satan is let loose again.

 **Job 2:4-8**

But notice at every point that God sets the limit on Satan's malevolence. Satan must present himself at God's court. Satan must seek permission to inflict suffering. Satan is first told that he must not touch Job himself, only what is around him. And when he finally is allowed to harm Job's body a limit is still set – he must not take his life.

So notice how the scene is set up. Evil is real. There are real forces of evil out there whose only purpose is to do us harm – and Satan is at their head.

There are belief systems which deny the reality of evil. Pantheism, for instance, which is the belief of Buddhists in particular. Pantheism suggests that the divine is in everything – indeed that the sum of all reality is god. So reality cannot be evil – in the sense that it is opposed to God. Reality just IS. Our experience of pain stems, not from the evilness of events, but from our lack of adjustment to them.

In this way pantheism is very close to atheism. Radical atheists accept that they don't really have a concept of evil. The world just IS, so the idea that it is not the way it is supposed to be is meaningless to them.

This scene says NO. Evil is a real monstrous intrusion into our world, led by Satan himself.

But evil is not sovereign – God is. He is even sovereign over Satan. There is an asymmetry in God's sovereignty over good and evil. God wills good. God initiates good. Even his interventions here are good – to praise Job, to limit Job's sufferings. God does not initiate, or will evil on Job. Satan does, but God does not. But God is still ultimately sovereign over the evil that occurs. God's purpose is not ultimately evil, whereas Satan's purpose is evil. God does not lift his own hand against Job, Satan does. But God has not lost control of the situation.

Here is the scene in heaven, then, on December 26th 2004, as that tsunami is unleashed on the Indian ocean. Here is the scene in heaven as the suffering that troubles you unfolds.

It is not easy. There are superficially easier answers from polytheism to atheism but ultimately they will not satisfy. I want to call you to come with me on Job's journey of discovery. I want to warn you against three quick conclusions that you might come to.

The first conclusion is this – I won't think about this.

Let me tell you if you bury your head in the sand like an ostrich then sooner or later evil will hurt you deep in your soul. If you think that the problem of suffering is not an issue for you then just live a little longer. It will be.

The second simplistic conclusion to avoid is this – “God is not good.”

Life may suggest that to you. Even our first reading of Job may suggest that. But I urge you hesitate before you simply reject his goodness. The deepest joy a human being can know is discovering the goodness of God. Don't give up on that discovery easily.

And the third simplistic solution to avoid... - “God is not in control”.

If God is not in control then you and I have no hope that good will ultimately triumph totally. But that is the heart of the Christian gospel. Especially when suffering comes we need to know that God is in control and that one day

‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’