

Job 23 1-9, 16-17; Mark 10, 17-31

‘As if You were not there

Stricken mothers wonder whether God heeds prayer.’

A friend of mine, a churchgoer, a good woman, had faith in God. Her faith had sustained her through many crises, the worst of which was the suicide of her son at eighteen. Then her six-year-old grandson had a brain tumour and was dying, horribly, in pain. My friend believed in the power of prayer; and so she prayed for him. She didn't pray to let him live – it was obvious that he was dying. No, what she prayed for was for the terrible pain he was suffering to be taken from him. Her six-year-old grandson died, in pain. ‘My faith is worthless,’ she told me. ‘There is no God.’

Where is God when there is suffering? How do we deal with suffering when it hits us?

The book of Job is a wonderful story, one of the Books of Wisdom of the Bible. If you haven't read it for yourself, do. Job was rich. He owned 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys – and he had ten children (who got on well with each other). In the ancient story, he enjoyed his wealth, and his family life. He was a good man and God-fearing.

‘Pah!’ said Satan to God. ‘Job is faithful and true to You. So what? Look at the life you've given him! No wonder. Try testing him. Let's see him keep faith then. Let's see him continue to be good.’

Satan has the oxen that belonged to Job, Job's donkeys, and a number of his servants killed. Then Satan has more of the servants, and all the sheep killed. Then Satan has more of the servants and the camels killed. And then - Satan kills all Job's ten sons and daughters. In one day.

What does Job do? He tears his robe in mourning and shaves his head and falls on the ground and worships God. ‘Naked I came from my mother's

womb,’ he says philosophically, ‘and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’

‘Well?’ says God to Satan. ‘Look at what you’ve done to Job, and still he is a man of integrity, a good man, a man of faith.’

‘Skin for skin!’ jeers Satan. ‘People will give anything to save their own lives. Let me touch his bone and his flesh, and then we’ll see.’

God agrees – just so long as Satan doesn’t kill Job. Satan covers Job in revolting smelly, leaking, painful sores. Job squats on the bare earth in agony, suffering.

Job is heroically patient at his suffering. Job’s wife and his friends, his so-called comforters, say, ‘You did something wrong to deserve this suffering; you must have done. Job insists that he hasn’t. However, he does want God to explain – why is this happening to me? In today’s passage, he is desperate. Where is God when he needs him? ‘If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him: on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.’

Job laments, and he argues, but he doesn’t curse God. Through all his agony, he hangs on to that relationship, he with God. His faith does not protect him. No, but his faith is what holds him through hard times. He’s not giving up.

The much-loved father of another friend of mine died in a tragic accident. My friend is Jewish. When I went to pay respects to the family, in the room where the mourners were gathered, they sang the Kaddish; it is sung by Jews whenever there is mourning: a great praise to God. It goes like this:

May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed.

May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days and in the lifetimes of the entire family of Israel, swiftly and soon. May His great Name be

blessed forever and ever; Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty, upraised, and lauded be the name of the Holy One.

Despite tragedy and death, they were worshipping and glorifying God.

The man in Mark's gospel is a success story. He has kept the Commandments as all good men of faith are asked to do. He approaches Jesus confidently, because he's ticked all the boxes. He obeys the rules: he hasn't committed adultery, he hasn't murdered, he hasn't lied; he feels pretty good about himself. He isn't going through torment like Job. But he worries: what will happen to me when I die? Is there some box that he's left out, that he hasn't ticked? What else must I do to have eternal life? he asks Jesus. Jesus recognizes that this is a man of faith – but how the man lives is all in the negative. Beyond sticking to the rules, what has he actually done? Jesus sees into the man's soul. He sees that if the man would only stop being careful and complacent, he would be capable of love. He could actively love God, actively do good, actively be generous. The man hasn't been tested, he has not reached faith in the depths of his being. So Jesus tells him to go away and sell all he has and become his disciple. The man can't do it. His complacent faith is not enough. He goes away, despairing. His relationship with God has not stood Job's test.

It is possible that in our own lives, when things seem to be going so well, that sacrifice will be asked of us; it is possible that we shall be asked for *more*.

When we are children, we learn that parents may take things away from us. As we grow up and mature, we accept that our parents cannot always solve our problems for us, and they can be unfair. And yet, we can love them, and know that they love us. We can go to them for comfort and strength. Part of growing up with God is how we cope when life goes against us. When we suffer, when we're in pain, we could lose our faith, as one of my friends did, we could turn against it like the young man. Or we can be like Job. We can see faith not as a transaction – I've been good, so good things should happen to me - but as a relationship. We can go to God for strength and comfort to cope with

the pain and suffering, knowing that He understands, that He is beside us – and our faith will deepen.

God understands? Yes, because the worst that can happen to us, happened to God as Christ. God made Himself vulnerable, God as Jesus, betrayed by those whom he loved most. God as Jesus bore humiliation, torture, vicious crucifixion. When we suffer pain, when we are damaged, when we see others suffer, we know that God knows what this is like.

Has our faith come easy? Have we been tested?

The great writer and man of faith Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that he could only worship a suffering God. When we are at our most vulnerable, bruised, tormented, we can find the divine. Job has has everything taken from him. He can no longer simply enjoy his blessings, can no longer worship God complacently. He is made to suffer, and learns, deep inside himself, what loving God can mean. The world with all its wonders was there before Job. The world with all its wonders will be there when he is gone. He gains a sense of an over-arching perspective, of his own small place in the universe, as shall we – and that, curiously, gives comfort.

So - are we like the man in the gospel: do we simply obey the rules and believe that is enough, instead of going further, going deeper. Have we done enough good in this world?

Unlikely. There is always more that we can do.

Are we going to suffer more than we have already, you and I? Quite possibly. Who can tell what form that suffering will take, or how or when it will come. What matters is how we deal with it. God knows, Jesus knows what it is to suffer.

Will suffering grind us down as it did my friend; shall we lose our faith, feel ‘there is no God’? I do not believe that it was the will of God making my friend’s grandson suffer. But I do think that Jesus was there, trying to be beside

her and her daughter and her grandson. In tragedy, we can find the love of God deeper than we ever suspected.

When we are desperate, shall we turn to God and find God still there, our comforter and our strength? Shall we, like Job, feel a deepening and a widening of our love of God, shall we, too, feel able to praise God and say, as does Job at the end of his ordeal:

‘I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.’

I pray that we can. *Amen*