

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

October 3rd 2018

The problem of pain

So, there sits Job on his ash heap, his shard of broken pot in his hand, scratching at the sores that cover his body. He is a pitiful sight. We need to know though that his suffering far outstretches his wretched skin condition described here. In the previous chapter a succession of disasters have robbed him of all his livelihood – oxen, donkeys, sheep, shepherds, camels, camel tenders. They've all gone due to one calamity after another. And then finally a messenger comes to tell him that his children have perished too, destroyed when a whirlwind collapsed the house they were in. And now he sits among the ashes and he hasn't much left to lose.

Maybe there is something grimly appropriate in encountering Job on this particular Sunday, for as we gather together this morning we find ourselves wondering, how many Jobs were there in Indonesia last week when the earthquake and tsunami hit? How many innocents going about their daily routines, only to find their lives ravaged and devastated? How many like Job's children, crushed by buildings collapsing like cards? And of course the big question that confronts us head on, the persistent question that confronts believers is why? Why? Why? Why? And here, let's face it, we are grasping at the Achilles heel of the Christian faith. Here we find ourselves treading on a fault-line that threatens the very foundation of our beliefs. Why does God allow it? Here in this chapter Job's suffering is presented as a kind of test of his faith, but as the book goes on this is side-lined as bigger, deeper questions are raised about a good God and a world of suffering.

Well, in the scope of this brief meditation we can't go far into this, but I would just indicate one, partial response. And it's prompted by something someone once said to me when we were discussing loss and bereavement. I referred to the oft-quoted saying that time is a great healer, but this person said, 'no, it's not time that heals. It's what you do with the time.' It's not time that heals, but what you do with it, and I would improvise on that and suggest that with regard to suffering generally it is not 'why?', but 'what should we do with it?' Not 'why has this happened to me?', but what am I going to do with it? And that's a question that engages not just our intellects but our energies and our passions and our actions. When we come up against suffering like Job's, what do we do with it?

A man named Victor Frankl was a prisoner in concentration camps during the second World War, including Auschwitz, but he survived and went on after the war to become an influential psychologist. He reflected on his wartime experiences and why some prisoners were not only able to survive their horrifying conditions, but even to grow in the process. Frankl concluded that even in the direst circumstances you have choices. Even in tragedy you are faced with an inner decision as to whether you will submit to forces that would rob you of your very self, or whether you will make choices that make life meaningful and purposeful - even in Auschwitz. And those who endured and survived the camps were the latter. Frankl was not a Christian, but we might interpret him by saying that even in the deepest darkness there are choices we can make that lead to resurrection and life, no matter how deep the scars.

Returning to the tsunami last week. I recall back in 2013 the utter devastation wrought in the Philippines by typhoon Haiyan - the same chaos and destruction, bodies and rubble and stench. Only I remember being astounded to read a report of how a group of people were gathered together in the ruins of a church and mass was being said. I remember the same thing being described after the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010. In the chaos and squalor of Port au Prince reports told of people worshipping God, gathered in the ruins and singing. And returning to Job, this reminds me of an astonishing verse at the end of chapter 1 which we did not read where, after being told of all the destruction and death that had befallen him, we read, 'Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped.'

That's asking a lot. For some, worship after painful loss is a step too far. That must wait. But here is an indication that there are choices even in the darkest night, even among the ashes. The question there is not 'why?', but 'what will I do with this?' And as a community of the crucified and risen Lord, we can help and empower one another to make the choices that lead to resurrection and to life. Amen.

O loving God,
 we struggle at times with what we read
 and see in the world around us:
 natural disaster and catastrophe that leads to such loss of life;
 and human evil and wickedness that brings death
 and destruction upon our fellow human beings.

And we wish it was otherwise,
and we yearn for the day when people will live
in safety and security,
and when war and natural disaster will be no more.

Hear us as we pray today for the people of Sulawesi
in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami.
We pray for the bereaved, for all who have lost loved ones;
we pray for the injured;
we pray for those who have lost homes and livelihoods;
we pray for all who work to bring rescue and relief.
O God who is able to bring life out of death,
bring resurrection to this community, we pray.
Be in the reconstruction of lives and of buildings.

And God, be with those closer to home
who are feeling bereft,
who are struggling with loss,
who are wracked with pain,
who are facing the prospect of the death of a loved one,
or facing their own death.
Grant them the support of loved ones.
Bring to them courage, and hope,
and the peace that only you can give.

And as we come now to this table,
may we find here, in bread and wine,
your presence and your grace.
And so may we receive strength to live
courageously and to make those choices
that lead to life.
In Jesus, name we pray. Amen.