



Sunday 14 October, 2018 – 10.30am

A sermon preached by the Revd Elaine Farmer, Diocese of Canberra Goulburn on the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost:

Readings: Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Psalm 22:1-15, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17:31

*God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!*¹

Why this blast of Good Friday sorrow? Job and the Psalmist – these are not voices we want to hear now. Holy Week is long behind us but here they are, calling to us from the valley of the shadow of death where we say we shall fear no evil, but we do. They upset the ordered balance that we want, and we think we've established, in our lives. Faithful steadiness. Everything clear. Understandable. Job's painful cry, for example – there's something wild, on the loose, unconventional, about it. Job forces us to face the threatening fact of an uncontrollable world. His misery and heartfelt pleas to God confront us with what Martin Buber calls 'the rent in the heart of the world'.² And in that rent there are no certainties, only the mystery of God's enigmatic holiness.³

We don't want to hear Job's cry because it drags out of that rent in the world's heart, and in our own, all the 'why questions'. Why is there such suffering? Why are there people starving to death? Why are people wandering homeless, their lives shattered by war, terrorism, poverty, natural disasters, disease and unemployment? Why? If you stand for justice, mercy and compassion, God, why don't you do something about it? Job couldn't answer those questions and neither can we. And the silence that greets this anguish is fraught with fear that we won't get answers, let alone ones we want – the ones that will keep us comfortable and untroubled. The silence reminds us that God cannot be contained by us into a conventional framework that we recognise, and can manage – and manipulate. We want safety and security – comfortable faith – and the 'why questions' don't bring us that.

That's what Job discovered. He'd lost everything. And for no reason that he could fathom. There was no fairness about his plight. Nor justice. *"My complaint is bitter!"* he lamented and we get his point. His friends were sitting in the dirt with him – the Jewish practice of *shiva*, sitting with one who is suffering and sharing their lament. Sharing they might have been, but not very helpfully. *"Can a mortal be of use to God?"* demanded Eliphaz, Job's friend. *"Can even the wisest be of service to [God]? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to [God] if you make your ways blameless?"*⁴ In other words, Job, divine justice must have condemned you, and you've got what you deserve. *"Therefore snares are around you, and sudden terror*

¹ Job 23:16-17.

² Martin Buber, *The Prophet Faith*, Harper & Row, New York, 1949, p. 191.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching Year B*, WestminsterJohnKnox, Louisville, Kentucky, 1993, p. 541.

⁴ Job 22:2-3.

overwhelms you, or darkness so that you cannot see; a flood of water covers you."⁵ Eliphaz burst with self-righteousness but, in his pious naïveté, he missed Job's main complaint.

It wasn't so much the particulars of Job's suffering that mattered to him, nor even the issue of justice, but the apparent utter absence of God. This silence. This lack of presence bemused Job. God seemed unknowable. He believed in God, and his faith and all his instincts told him Eliphaz's fatalistic acceptance was worthless. Oh, he agreed with Eliphaz that God is a just God! But where was God that they might discuss the matter of his innocence. "If I knew where I might find you, God, I'd lay out my case before you. But no matter which way I turn, you're not there!"⁶ And, dear God, if you are hidden from me in this *deep darkness* Eliphaz talks about⁷ then let me die, or find me a huge rock to hide under! Job hurls his lament to the silent God: "*God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!*"⁸

But such a cry of resignation! Don't you think? It smacks of Eliphaz's fatalistic acceptance. This is odd. And it hints at nothing much more helpful to us than the cliché about patient Job. Where is faithful Job in those two verses? Where is the rebellious Job who rejected his friends' piety, who accused God of injustice? Here's a thought. An answer to this contradictory resignation might lie in not much more than translation from the Hebrew. Today we've heard from the NRSV but here's another translation of those two verses: "*God has made my heart faint, the Almighty has terrified me, yet I am not silenced by the darkness, or by the mystery that hides [God].*"⁹ There's defiance! More accurately, there's defiant faithfulness! Defiant but faithful Job who could still proclaim passionately, "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last [God] will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been ... destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God!*"¹⁰

Defiant faithfulness! Job cannot see God now. He confesses to doubts. He realises it just isn't possible to know the mind of God in every circumstance. But he will live with his doubts! He will not betray God, or his faith community, or himself. Contradictions and integrity somehow have to find a way to live together. Job realises perhaps just one truth: God will never be contained. Boxed up. Managed. There is no conventional understanding possible.

Is that all there is for us? Unanswerable 'why questions'? Doubts? Suffering? An unknowable unfathomable God? Holy absence? Despair? No. We do have an answer to those questions! It's 'no'. That isn't all there is. Despair would say God is

⁵ Job 22: 10-11.

⁶ Based on Job 23:3-4 & 8-9.

⁷ Job 22:13.

⁸ Job 23:16-17.

⁹ *NIV* translation. See also on the *REB*: "It is God who makes me fainthearted, the Almighty who fills me with fear, yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides him."

¹⁰ Job 19:25:26.

absent and has abandoned us to a world of total indifference. That is not the Christian view of things. The Christian answer is the God of history, active and caring, the God who hears our laments and weeps. Who hears our laughter and laughs with us. Who does not abandon us but gave everything to us – in the Christ.

Job's story is hugely important for us because in faith he flung the 'why questions' at God, and in defiance refused to abandon the God, or faith.

His lament pointed to something beyond his realm though he did not know what it was. Perhaps it is only the pain of lament that can take us beyond Job's 'why questions' and into the realm of the unanswerable, to the core of the gospel. To the Cross, and Jesus' cry, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*¹¹ Jesus' cry gathers up Job's frustration, *"O that I knew where I might find [God]!"*.¹² And the psalmist's pain, *"I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but [I] find no rest"*.¹³ And all our laments.

This is where our story ends, not with our suffering but with God's suffering – at the Cross. Jesus' cry on the Cross somehow pierces the mystery. Strikes to the heart of God, and brings forth to us a flood of comfort and grace and hope. And from that enigmatic mystery, the heart of God, comes also the call to active faith, daring faith, risky faith. To live – like Job – in defiant questioning faithfulness.

I began by asking the question, why do we need this blast of Good Friday sorrow? Why in our settled lives be reminded of 'the rent in the heart of the world', and in our own hearts?

Because it is too easy to settle comfortably into ordered lives and think we can manage and control anything that might come our way. Because it is too easy to shut our ears to the 'why questions' lest we be disturbed by hearing our own painful cries in the world's laments. Because it is too easy to settle for Easter grace over Good Friday sorrow and forget the Cross, the source of hope in our lives. Because we need to be reminded of Christ's gift of love on the Cross: new life and possibility. Because we need to be reminded that the end of our story is God, not our tears. Because we need to be reminded of the mystery of God's enigmatic holiness.

It is a mysterious business, this encountering Christ, encountering God's enigmatic holiness. I want to leave you with a poignant reflection on this mystery. In a little book more than a hundred years old, a spiritual seeker after answers to the 'why' questions has left us an account of his experience of the veneration of the Cross on Good Friday:

... it was the simplest thing I have ever seen,' he wrote, 'as clear and natural as a pool of water, and yet as bitter as brine. The crucifix, laid as if for tenderness' sake on a soft cushion, is approached by all who are present. I, too, went up, a heretic and outcast, for Jesus Christ came to save sinners – and I knelt there, trembling, between two boys who seemed to tend that wounded Figure, wiping His feet softly after each kiss. And I kissed the smooth ivory, too, above the nail ... and He did not strike me!¹⁴

¹¹ Psalm 22:1.

¹² Job 23:3.

¹³ Psalm 22:2.

¹⁴ Robert Hugh Benson, *Papers of a Pariah*, Longmans, Green, & Co. London, 1913, p. 92.

Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal one – like Job, we are not silenced by the darkness, but awed by the mystery that is you; always with us; loving us; and offering comfort for the rents in our hearts. And you do not strike us.

It is a good thing to be reminded.