

Sunday 14 October, 2018 – 6pm Evensong

A sermon preached by Mr Philip Nicholls, Authorised Lay Minister and Director of Music of St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne, on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost:

Reading: Job 28: 12-18; Psalm 90:13-17; Hebrews 4.1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'

If you were here in the Cathedral for Evensong on Tuesday (which I know at least a couple of you were!) you would have heard the men's voices singing 'For he looketh to the ends of the earth'. It's the middle part of William Boyce's setting of the Revised Version text of tonight's first reading. William Boyce was born in London in 1711 and was a chorister of St Paul's Cathedral, before becoming organist at St Michael Cornhill in 1736 – Harold Darke would later hold this post (that's Harold Darke of Darke in F fame, boys and men!). Harold Darke was succeeded by Richard Popplewell, a teacher of Siegfried Franke, our Cathedral Organist. As was customary at the time, Dr Boyce accumulated a number of other organist posts, including being an organist of the Chapel Royal. With the assistance of deputies, he was able to ""play the organ"" in at least three places at once – and draw three stipends – as well as being Master of the King's Music from 1755. A man of great talent, with a fine house, a good income, a lovely wife, servants, and two children.

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. He had lots of children, and lots of sheep, and lots of camels, and lots of oxen, and donkeys, and servants – and God allowed Satan to take away the lot, and to inflict him with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. God did this, apparently, to prove to Satan that Job would never curse God, and would remain faithful, even though all he had – his possessions, his children, and his health – were violently taken away from him.

This doesn't sound very much like a God I'd like to believe in. I googled 'historical Job' to see if there is much evidence for Job's existence, and having read a list of job vacancies in Australia from 1979 (historical jobs!), I finally found that different traditions have different Jobs – as is often the case with Old Testament figures, however important they are to the overall biblical narrative.

The book of Job is part of the Old Testament Wisdom literature, along with the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs: Proverbs shows us that the good prosper, the evil are punished, and the world is ordered by a wise and just God. Ecclesiastes questions this, proposing that people don't always necessarily get what they deserve – life is unpredictable. And Job

shows us that even when bad things happen to good people, if they remain faithful to God, all will work out for them in the end.

'The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; ... he had seven sons and three daughters ... Job saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.'

Many ancient cultures viewed their gods as fickle – gods who use humans as their playthings, to prove points, or to argue positions with other gods, whether for good or evil. The book of Job is the Hebrew entry in this literary trope. Whether you believe Job was a real man or not, the Book of Job fits this literary profile.

How then is our God different to all the others? Let's look for example to the Greek tragic heroes: in almost all their stories, there is an initial fault, or sin, which they commit that leads to their downfall. Job? Nope. Blameless and upright before the Lord. He feared God, and turned away from evil. He had quite simply done nothing wrong – and our God restores his fortunes ... more in his end than his beginning. How then do we account for Job's treatment? And we must do this from an ancient world perspective, not allowing our post-modern minds and ethics to cloud the analysis ...

We don't like talking about evil much in the postmodern world. But in the Book of Job, it's quite clear: God says to Satan: Where have you come from? And Satan replies: From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it. Not once, but twice in the first two chapters. If we believe in God (and we have just proclaimed the Apostles' Creed – I BELIEVE IN GOD – If we believe in God, then unfortunately we must also believe in the Devil – Ha Satan, the Accuser, or whatever we're supposed to call him. If we believe in goodness and mercy, unfortunately we must also believe in evil and suffering. The fact is that good and bad things happen to all people, although it pains me to say it from my context of relative wealth, health, comfort, and privilege. In the book of Job, God allows Satan to inflict misery and suffering on Job, and we must understand, that in the Ancient World, this was believed to be possible.

What do we believe today? In the face of international warfare, the plight of refugees, natural disasters, and the small, personal injustices that we all face, everyday, how can we believe in a God who allows these things to happen. Where do we find God in them?

Last Sunday evening, Associate Priest Emily Fraser challenged us to find God in tragedy by looking at those who help: the firefighters, the peacemakers and peacekeepers, the advocates, the comforters. God is certainly there in them. In addition to the helpers, God is also the refugee. God is also the collateral child killed in warfare. God is also the family wiped out through murder/suicide. God is the victim of sexual abuse. God has shared our

humanity – every part of it – especially its suffering – in the man Jesus Christ, and through him, we know God is with us and has experienced all the ups and downs of life.

‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’

In about 1730, at the age of 19 or 20, William Boyce first became aware of his own chronic hearing difficulties. Over the years, he found it to be getting worse, so much so, that by April 1768, the Vestry of St Michael Cornhill all but dismissed him. The poor man, ostensibly in a context of relative wealth, health, comfort, and privilege, one of Dr Boyce’s main musical faculties had deteriorated to the extent that he could no longer do a significant portion of his day-to-day work – that is, play the organ and prepare the choir. This must have been a tragedy for him: in comparison to Job’s trials, a small, personal injustice, but for Dr Boyce, a significant blow.

As some of you will know, this set back did not prevent Dr Boyce from making a very significant contribution to the music of the English Cathedral tradition. Indeed, he wrote the book on it (or, rather, compiled the anthology of it). Three volumes of it, ‘Boyce’s Cathedral Music’ were published between 1760 and 73. And he continued to be a popular and commissioned composer for church, concert hall, stage and opera theatre until his death, from gout, in 1779.

Tonight’s first reading is an interlude coming almost at the end of Job’s final defence. You’ll remember that having sat down among the rubbish with his piece of broken clay to scratch himself, three of Job’s so-called friends turn up, listen to him curse himself, then tell him everything he’s done wrong and how he deserved this treatment from God. Job defends himself on each and every count, then begins this ode on wisdom and understanding that we heard read earlier. Here is its substance:

Where shall wisdom be found, and where can we find understanding?

They’re not on the land; they’re not in the sea;

you can’t buy them, nor exchange them for the most valuable things on earth.

The living, neither human nor beast nor bird can’t find them.

The devil and death have heard rumours of them.

Only God knows the way to them.

When he created and surveyed the heavens and the earth and the sea and the storm ...

then he saw them, wisdom and understanding, and established them.

God says to humankind: The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;

and to depart from evil, that is understanding.

The fear of the Lord – that’s the ‘I believe in God’ bit ... the knowledge of faith and the following and living out of its teachings. But how do we depart from evil? We can’t avoid all evil, but we can in our choices do our best not to cause hurt to others. Dr Boyce didn’t

become deaf because of sin or evil: I'm sure there was a perfectly scientific explanation for it; and he obviously chose to avoid **being** evil, with the possible exception of double- or triple-booking himself on a Sunday morning! His epitaph under the dome in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral London reads: Happy in his compositions, much happier in a constant flow of harmony, through every Scene of Life, Relative or Domestic: the Husband, Father, Friend.'

Having resigned from St Michael Cornhill in 1768, I believe Dr Boyce was having his Job moment – although he wasn't sitting on the rubbish scratching himself! He moved to west London and set to work on the search for wisdom. His anthem *O Where shall wisdom be found?* setting the text of tonight's first reading, was composed in 1769, the year after he relinquished his performing duties. Given the final ten years of his life were spent teaching, writing, composing and being a mentor to many of the next generation of London musicians, and the fact that he continued composing and publishing into his final year, I think he made his peace with God. I'd like to think he found it in the sublime strains of *O Where shall wisdom be found?*

'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'

Next Sunday night at 6pm we are hosting a National Apology Service to survivors of sexual abuse on the Eve of the Prime Minister's apology to the nation. The service seeks repentance in recognition of the harm and distress caused to people over many years. We will hear of countless survivors touched by evil – if any need proof that evil is in the world, look no further. We are called to depart from evil and to fear and love the Lord.

And so let us pray:

Hail, God of our forebears.

Hail Job's God and ours.

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.

Faithful and just God, throughout the generations you have called women and men to fear and laud you; you have encouraged them to flee from evil, and so to receive wisdom and understanding. Give us grace to do likewise. Give us wisdom and courage to name and repent of our sins, deliver us from evil, and enter your rest. Through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord, and in the power of the Holy Spirit we pray, ever one God, world without end. Amen.