

Sermon, 28 January 2024, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text: Job 19: 19-27 (taken from Good News Translation):

- ¹⁹ My closest friends look at me with disgust;
those I loved most have turned against me.
- ²⁰ My skin hangs loose on my bones;
I have barely escaped with my life.^[a]
- ²¹ You are my friends! Take pity on me!
The hand of God has struck me down.
- ²² Why must you persecute me the way God does?
Haven't you tormented me enough?
- ²³ How I wish that someone would remember my words
and record them in a book!
- ²⁴ Or with a chisel carve my words in stone
and write them so that they would last forever.^[b]
- ²⁵ But I know there is someone in heaven
who will come at last to my defence.
- ²⁶ Even after my skin is eaten by disease,
while still in this body^[c] I will see God.^[d]
- ²⁷ I will see him with my own eyes,
and he will not be a stranger.

There are two great questions in the centuries-old debate between those who believe in God and those opposed to such a belief. Neither has ever quite been answered in a way which is good enough for both.

The uncomfortable question for the faithful has always been, if a loving God exists as you claim, why is there so much suffering in the world ? Why should anyone believe your claim of a God Who loved us enough to give His only Son, when we can read in the news every day about violence, war, disease, starvation and a hundred and one other evils ?

For those who would deny God, the nagging question is, if God doesn't exist and can be disproved entirely by science, why do so many still believe in Him ? If today's understanding means that no rational person

could consider any faith realistic, how do you account for the billions across the world who still search for Him ? Are they all just too stupid to realize the meaningless of their experience ?

Until one of these questions is answered in an absolute sense, the debate cannot be ended. And it probably won't be the first because faith, by definition, is not knowledge. It takes courage, conviction and a genuine sense of spirituality to hold on to faith. If it were just something you could know and touch, then it wouldn't take much to believe in its existence.

However, the case of Job, which we read about today, is a very interesting one. To put it in context, in the story of Job, he is a well-off man yet still devout in his dedication to God and His ways. Satan claims that without his material blessings, he will renounce his faith and curse God. God allows Satan to put him to the test. Immediately, Job's wealth is wiped out, his children are killed, and he becomes infested with disease (quite possibly leprosy). The only friends who will still talk to him basically accuse him of sin and having cut himself off from God since they can see no other explanation for what has happened.

Job's response is noteworthy though. He does not stop to ask, is there even a God out there. Instead, he acknowledges unfailingly that God is Creator of all, His greatness is unquestionable and He is just. He then asks, so how come God is letting this happen to him ? He doesn't take his suffering as a given and use it to question whether God exists or whether God is good. He doesn't question his own faith. Instead, he seeks answers to square his faith with his reality.

The response of Job's friends is not very helpful. They too acknowledge God, at least to the limited extent that they understand Him. However, they can only assume and therefore accuse Job of committing sin. They explain away suffering with a shallow faith which cannot tolerate anything for which they don't have a convenient answer.

However, this is not what Job needs. He cries out in verse 21, "You are my friends ! Take pity on me ! The hand of God has struck me down."

You can almost sympathize with Job's friends. There is no convenient but convincing answer. But that is maybe not what Job even needs, at least not right now. He won't deny his innocence and he wants to know the truth. He takes comfort, in fact, in stating that, "I know there is someone in heaven who will come at last to my defence. Even after my skin is eaten by disease, while still in this body, I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes, and he will not be a stranger."

This is important. Job is sure of his innocence in the end but right here, right now, he is basically asking to be understood. In a sense, he is asking for compassion.

When we are confronted by suffering, it does not help us or anyone else to throw our hands up in horror and ask why does the God, in Whom we believe as a just and loving Father, allow all this to happen ? Does this mean we're wrong ? Instead, we already have our faith and we don't need to question it. Even if we do not understand the situation we face, we have faith in a loving God and we should apply it. We should make it work. It is not there to be questioned and tested – it is there to be used. Those who suffer do not usually need a carefully argued and logical explanation to why they are suffering. They need someone who will show compassion, who will listen to them and who will do something.

In John 1, we read of God's love, made clear in Jesus: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out."

Job himself is an example to us all. Despite the darkness of his suffering, it does not put out his faith and it keeps him going as the fundamentally just and decent man he is.

In fact, it would be appalling if we let suffering put out our faith. If people ask, why does all this suffering and wrong not convince you that God and His ways cannot actually be for real, our response must be that their existence mean that the way of God is more important than anything.

For every act of evil, for every word of hatred, there has to be an act of kindness, a word of forgiveness and a display of God's love.

Coming back to the story of Job, although it isn't described as such, you might wonder what the reaction of Satan would be. Suffering has actually failed to deliver what it was supposed to accomplish and what he was after. In fact, if you stop to think about it, it can't be that easy to be a follower of evil, even if not many would describe themselves as such. We are inclined to read the news and are tempted to despair when we read about more, catastrophic wars, of rising levels of starvation, of widespread sickness, of massive injustice. And we are certainly right to be concerned at these things. Jesus hardly ignored them Himself.

At the same time, just imagine that actually you were in favour of wrong. Would it not be a shade frustrating that for all the terrible things going on in the world, there are still people who try to negotiate peace, who stand up to wrongdoing, who arrange food shipments to the needy, who work to bring healthcare and education to those who lack it ? If hatred and greed and so widespread, is it not infuriating that people might greet their neighbours with genuine respect, work for local charities, forgive things done wrong to them or even, just still go to Church ?

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out."

When we confront sin and darkness, our response should never be to question simply why God should allow it or does He even exist when we can see it. Perhaps we do not understand it but to quote Job again, "Even after my skin is eaten by disease, while still in this body I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes, and he will not be a stranger."

In the face of suffering and wrong, the world does not need us to question our faith. It needs us to use it and the compassion, the hope and the love which we can bring are the response which God calls on us to deliver.