

Trinity 10 2021, Matins

Job 39:1-40:4

Romans 11:25-36

Hebrews 12:1-17

There are many different kinds of pain, as I'm sure you know. Our readings today deal with two kinds.

In our second reading, from the letter to the Hebrews, we are given a kind of pain which is perhaps less often felt in our country these days: suffering for a cause. Choosing a path and taking it, knowing that in doing so we will make our life, on the face of it, immeasurably worse.

Whereas our first reading, from Job, deals with the kind of pain that we are likely to be more familiar with: apparently random suffering, such as the death of a family member or a sudden reversal of fortunes in business. '*Why me?*' is the perennial question which is essentially the subject of the whole of the book of Job.

One of the things that surprised me most when I started curacy was that most people, on deeper acquaintance, carry some great suffering around with them. You may be older and wiser, or just have suffered more yourself; but for me, this was news.

There is often a sense however, when asking the question '*Why me?*', that the norm in human existence is a peaceable, happy and satisfied life. I'm afraid ordination has rather reversed that assumption for me (and I apologise if you wanted cheering up this morning).

And so, one response to the '*Why me?*' question, might be '*Why not me?*' I would not recommend saying that to someone asking the initial question however!

A more subtle way of making the same point is to see suffering as an essential part of human existence.

Our understanding of original sin and the Fall doesn't always help with that view, in that our understanding of Genesis, as mediated by St Augustine, is that there was no pain or suffering until the eating of the forbidden fruit in Eden; therefore, the ideal existence is one *without* pain, as Adam and Eve originally enjoyed.

For us however, that ideal is one we cannot find our way back to in this life. We cannot help sinning, and we cannot avoid suffering; and we are only ultimately saved from both through the grace of Christ.

On the face of it this sounds rather severe and puritanical (incidentally, not things I am often accused of!). I find these truths liberating however, and, more to the point, realistic.

Of the people I have ministered to, in admittedly a relatively small number of years, even more surprising than the levels of pain, has been the general lack of any real connection between the objective level of awfulness of what someone has suffered, if there is such a thing, and their later net happiness or sadness. I don't think I really believed that that was possible before starting my ministry, and it is not to say people are not marked by pain, but I have nevertheless found it to be true.

That could sound like a glib, or even dangerous, thing to say. And it is not to undermine the depths of pain, but for some, for many even, those depths can be transformed. They are transfigured even.

There is no formula for this. I do not think it is simply a question of how much faith a person has, and faith is in any event a gift we are given, but I find something of the same transfiguration of pain in our reading from Job.

Job does not get an answer to his question of 'Why me?' Search and search as you might for an answer to that question, the only answer given is awe in the face of God.

One of the extraordinary things about the passage we heard is that it does not simply proclaim the wonder and beauty of God's creation, though it does that, but it also exults in what is terrifying even.

I love the description of the horse: *'Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength.'*

Now, I have to confess, I've never tried to make a grasshopper afraid, but I think we all know what God means when He refers to the glory of a horse's nostrils!

Even if on the wrong end of those flaring nostrils in battle, they are still something to be marvelled at.

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The kind of pain dealt with in the letter to the Hebrews may seem a very different sort of pain – if you know that Christians are persecuted, and you decide nevertheless to become one, the source of your pain and suffering seems far more explicable than that of Job.

And yet, we hear that *'whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.'*

We often shy away from attributing anything seemingly bad to God, and yet part of the answer Job receives is that all things come from God, both the terrifying, but awe-inspiring, as well as the more obviously beautiful and good.

The problem of how a good God could let suffering come to good people seems far less present – your earthly father has chastened you too hasn't he? we are told.

That answer is I think far harder to stomach after the horrors of the twentieth century.

But the author's words of encouragement are easier to hear in this context: *'let us run with patience the race that is set before us.'*

*'Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees. ...*

*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.'*

And these words are as applicable to suffering which is seemingly random, as to that which we knowingly face.

For, however hard we grapple with the problem, we as Christians can no more adequately explain human suffering than we can avoid it.

We can however, as Job is told, try to see ourselves in the context of the greater glory of God's creation; and to know that our suffering is never in isolation. It is not in isolation from that glory, hard as that can be to take when we are at our lowest; but nor is it in isolation from the suffering of others; and most significantly for us, it is never in isolation from the suffering of Jesus Christ, who has been there before us, and for each of us.

And we can hope and pray too, that through persevering when we cannot do so in our own strength, '*compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses*' as we are, our heads might be lifted up to Jesus, '*the author and finisher of our faith.*' And that through Him we might find our true home in God.

Amen

Fr Christopher