

**Sermon for Remembrance Sunday – St James, Cambridge
The Revd Deborah Ford – 10.11.13**

Lectionary Texts: Job 19:23-27a)

Psalm 17:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5; 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth...[and] I shall see God....”

(Job 19:23-26)

- A couple of days ago I had a long conversation with someone called Anthony Feltham-White: he’s currently chaplain to the armed forces based at Tidworth in Wiltshire, but told me he can’t wait to be in the field again with the men: “That’s where my heart lies and my real work is.” He’s been involved in many operations in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past nine years.
- Today’s passage from Job, had made me think of the huge significance and value of having certain things written down and I’d contacted Anthony with the hope of getting & being able to quote a letter written by a ‘contemporary’ soldier from the war zone.
- But of course what I hadn’t realised until we began to speak, is that it’s too *soon* for those letters... The pain and grief of the loss is too raw to be made public yet. It will take years (just as after other wars) to be able to bear and take in yet more of the cost of human violence and the atrocities of war.
- But what Anthony *did* say, was that one of the first questions the family and friends ask, if & when that dreaded moment of the death of their son/daughter/brother/sister/father/mother/friend comes... is: “Did they leave me a letter?”
- And how much difference it makes if they have.... One of his main jobs is to help soldiers write ‘last letters’ before every operational tour – just in case they never make it back.

- He told me how one young soldier (from one of the parachute regiments) killed in Afghanistan a couple of years ago had written to each of his family and friends telling them how much he loved, admired and enjoyed spending time with them... and left a few thousand pounds for the event of his death, expressing the wish that his friends spend it getting kitted out so they could come to his funeral dressed as gangsters... With plenty left over for so they could have a celebratory holiday together afterwards...
- It might sound a bit bizarre, but Anthony took the funeral and he said that it was both excruciating, but also a deeply joyful occasion.
- The letters from the WW1 trenches – like letters from other wars and prison camps over the years - express a wide and complex range of emotions: exhilaration, gratitude, exhaustion, homesickness, frustration, despair, dread, trust, faith and hope...As one soldier wrote:

“I have not written to you for a long time, but I have thought of you all the more as a silent creditor. But when one owes letters one suffers from them, so to speak, at the same time.

It is, indeed, not so simple a matter to write from the war, really *from* the war; and what you read as Field Post letters in the papers usually have their origin in the lack of understanding that does not allow a man to get *hold* of the war, to breathe it in although he is living in the midst of it.

The further I penetrate its true inwardness the more I see the hopelessness of making it comprehensive for those who only understand life in the terms of peacetime, and apply these same ideas to war in spite of themselves. They only *think* that they understand it. It is as if fishes living in water could have a clear conception of what living in the air is like. But when one is hauled out on to dry land and dies in the air, then he will know something about it.

So it is with the war. Feeling deeply about it, one becomes less able to talk about it every day. Not because one understands it *less* each day, but because one grasps it *better*. But it is a silent teacher, and he who learns becomes silent too.”

(Rudolph Binding April 1915)

Or as another soldier wrote in a letter to his father:

“It is simply *impossible* to describe on paper the feelings and experiences one has been through...”

- But what the letters *do* manage to express - whether it's the way someone is addressed ('Beloved...' 'Darling...' 'Dearest...' 'My dear...' Mother/Sister/Father/Brother etc) or the way they sign off, is deep *love*: which is what makes them so *powerful*. In the face of death, love is all that matters.
- I remember, after my father's death, how I longed for a letter he'd written to me that I could turn to, to remind me of his words and feelings to me... But he never was one for writing letters.
- Today's readings are all about people grappling with the realities and cost of suffering and evil in this life, too... asking where *real* hope is to be found.
- First, Job – who seems to get caught up in a battle that is more to do with God and Satan than anything directly to do with him/anything he has done- suffering one devastating loss after another...
- Then there's David, the psalmist, who is surrounded by enemies and cries out in prayer to God.
- The second letter to the Thessalonians is a letter written to a very young Christian community who are already facing suffering, opposition and persecution for their beliefs. They're confused about whether the 'day of the Lord' is already here or not – and what difference it makes to the ways they live and cope with what they're going through in the 'here and now'.
- And in Luke's gospel, Jesus takes on the Sadducees (it's the only time in Luke where he does). As compared to the Pharisees – the group of Jews who believe God will keep his promises and bring about justice beyond this world – the Sadducees believe that God's power is limited to life in *this* world. They aren't open to believing

in even the possibility that there could be anything more (not a million miles from a lot of the mindsets I meet in people today).

- But Jesus simply rejects the premise of their case with a theological ‘shrug.’ In eternal life, people won’t be able to die (let alone die), so it’s irrelevant to get hung up about whether someone has been the first, second or even seventh wife of someone in *this* life.
- Without the reality of God, we don’t have the necessary categories to even begin to think or understand the things that are ‘beyond’ our human being/minds.
- So many people I meet grapple with this. How can a good and loving God let such terrible suffering happen? How can a good and loving God let me hurt this much? Does he/she *really* love me and know what he’s doing?
- In a society where we value understanding and reason so highly, it can be difficult to let go of the endless ‘But why? Why God? Why why, why?’
- But as Elie Wiesel writes as he grapples with the meaning of the evil he witnessed and experienced in the holocaust: “Perhaps there is simply nothing *to* understand.”
- Such evil is *beyond* our understanding – all we can do is *trust* God to *be* God. *Whatever* forces try to threaten, undermine and oppose – we can trust that Jesus is the One who is the secret of a future in which good is vindicated. The ‘whys?’ are transformed into *who*: ‘*Who* are you, then, God? And can I really *trust* your promises?’
- Anthony told me how, when he’s working with the soldiers in his care, he’s dealing all the time with what he calls the ‘grey area’ between spirituality and superstition- and I’d say that in my work in the hospital, it’s often very similar.
- He told me about the ‘dog tags’ people wear with a cross on around their necks; the rosary beads strung over kit bags; the angels and biblical texts stuck or carved onto the sides of rifles; and about the number of vehicles he is asked to bless and the unusual number of baptisms he is asked to do just before a new operation. And I find the same in the hospital: people asking for

rosaries, or bottles of holy water, or angels to place on a loved one's pillow so that they will get well... They're prepared to cling onto almost anything they think might work.

- It's not for me to say, but I suppose the question is, are they signs of sheer superstition and 'magic' or something *more* than that? Signs that are based on a hope that is *substantial*... Something that gives *real* hope even in the *midst* of terrible suffering?
- Grace is not cheap. The supposed 'comfort' offered to Job by his so-called friends doesn't work, does it? They resort to religious formulae, insisting that he deserves what has happened to him: he must have sinned, because suffering is a result of punishment God inflicts on those who are wicked ... they can't make sense of it any other way.
- And any of you who've suffered the death of a significant loved one will know how much those platitudes hurt.
- But Job can't accept it: he refuses to accept that that is who God *is* - despite all that has happened and all that he's lost - and he's lost nearly everything... his wife, his children, his livelihood, his money, his friends, his reputation, his health....
- Evil has done its worst to him, and yet he *still* dares to believe and trust that God will not *let* this be the last word. And suddenly, through his repeated turning and crying out to God and telling God how he feels, something changes: Job *knows*: he doesn't know how or why he has had to go through all that he has, but he has encountered the living God, who is not only alive, but who intends to fulfil the purposes for the whole earth that he has already initiated:

“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth...[and] I shall see God....” (Job 19:23-26)

- Something so significant has happened that it's not enough to write it down on a piece of paper – or even a book.... it needs to be indelibly inscribed on a rock... perhaps something like a tombstone.

- *This* is what Job wants everyone to know – for all generations to come – throughout all eternity. He’s discovered that not only does God live but that when he dies he will meet God face to face.
- The word for a book is *biblios*: the Greek for a book or ‘bible’ – a scripture of living words and experiences we can turn to, to remind us of God’s love and God’ promises again and again... What a precious gift.
- Today is a day when we remember (perhaps more than any other day), the tension of the agony of the cross and the terrible cost of war, together with the hope and promise of the resurrection... trusting that through Jesus’ undergoing of suffering and death, they have been transformed. That’s the only perspective within which we can really remember and enter the pain of suffering to discover the glory of the cross.
- *That’s* why those last letters matter so much.... The family and friends of loved ones who have given up their lives for the greater good need to be reassured that their love for one another goes deeper than even death: *nothing* can separate them: “for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love neither can floods drown it.” (Song of Songs 8:6-7)
- Jesus knows that’s what the disciples are fearful of too, so he says: ‘*Love* one another....Do not let your hearts be troubled and/or afraid. *Trust* me....Let me give you *my* peace.’
- *Every* day needs to be a remembrance day...
- So as we prepare to celebrate Communion together, let us remember Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and life - the God of the living for whom *all* of are alive- and hold hope for those who are not yet able to, as we entrust to his love each person whom we remember with love, grief and gratitude.

Amen.
(DPF 10.11.13)

Job 19:23-27a)

²³ ‘O that my words were written down!
 O that they were inscribed in a book!
²⁴ O that with an iron pen and with lead
 they were engraved on a rock for ever!
²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives,
 and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
 then in my flesh I shall see God,
²⁷ whom I shall see on my side,
 and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
 My heart faints within me!

Psalm 17 ‘Prayer for Deliverance from Persecutors’
(A Prayer of David)

¹ Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;
 give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
² From you let my vindication come;
 let your eyes see the right.
³ If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
 if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
 my mouth does not transgress.
⁴ As for what others do, by the word of your lips
 I have avoided the ways of the violent.
⁵ My steps have held fast to your paths;
 my feet have not slipped.
⁶ I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
 incline your ear to me, hear my words.
⁷ Wondrously show your steadfast love,
 O saviour of those who seek refuge
 from their adversaries at your right hand.
⁸ Guard me as the apple of the eye;
 hide me in the shadow of your wings,
⁹ from the wicked who despoil me,
 my deadly enemies who surround me.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 ‘The Man of Lawlessness’

2As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, ²not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.³Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. ⁴He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. ⁵Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?...

Chosen for Salvation

13 But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,¹⁷ comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Luke 20:27-38 ‘The Question about the Resurrection’

27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸and asked him a question, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.’

34 Jesus said to them, ‘Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.’