

Sermon for Trinity 19 – 11.10.2015 – St James, Cambridge
The Revd Deborah Ford

Lectionary Texts: Job 23:1-9; 16-17

Psalm 22

Hebrews 4:12-end

Mark 10:17-31

“[Jesus said], ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age...and in the age to come.’ (Mark 10: 29-30)

- It’s quite a promise, isn’t it? But it’s also a big ask.
- And both of today’s Old Testament readings are the voices of people crying out for help as this (their faith and trust in God) is being tested to the limits in them.
- Firstly, it’s Job, who, after years of health, peace and blessing, has been plagued with one disaster after another... his beautiful children die; his property, livestock and livelihood are wiped out; his good health abandons him: one misery after another.
- He’s knocked for six as he tries to make sense of it all. Somehow, he knows God’s still there somewhere, but where? And why doesn’t he answer him?

“O that I knew where I might find him, that I might come to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I could reason with him... and would learn what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me.” (Job 23: 3-4)

- Where *is* God to be found? All he can do is trust God: he has no choice. But he is terrified to the point that he wants to disappear into the darkness: it’s too much.
- His anguish is echoed in the psalmist’s: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but**

you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest...” (Ps 22: 1-2)

- He, too, is wrestling with God – like Jacob with the angel at Jabbok and as Jesus did in Gethsemane – or the disciples after the crucifixion - desperately trying to hold on to their integrity with and in God in the midst of it all.
- Just a few days ago, I had a conversation with someone whose three year old son was having surgery for a lump they’d recently found on his neck. Whilst hoping against hope that it won’t be, their worst dread is, of course, that it will be cancer and that they might lose him. His Dad told me how they had tried for years for children and that after 7 miscarriages, he knows how blessed he is. “I know I probably shouldn’t have,” he said, “but I’ve always longed for a son...”
- “I love him so much... How could this be happening? I know we’re meant to trust God whatever, but what if...(and he broke down in sobs)... I feel so *powerless*...”
- That’s the point when so many people give up on God, isn’t it? ‘How could God care if he lets me hurt so much?’ ‘How could there be a good God with all the suffering in the world?’ ‘Why doesn’t God just intervene and *do* something?’
- It’s easy to fall into being a false comforter at moments like that, isn’t it? To try and offer some sort of rational explanation or ‘theodicy’.
- But that’s *not* what helps Job. However comforting it might be to hear and let others hold faith and hope for him at some level and for a period of time, he also knows that ultimately *he’s* the one who needs to hear and encounter *God* for himself.
- And only *God* knows & can bring about exactly what, how & when that will be: the God who has known him since before he was formed in his mother’s womb and who loves him more than he can possibly imagine (even when it might least *seem* like it).
- And somehow, Job *keeps going*, doesn’t he? He gradually stops talking *about* God and starts to address him directly: he starts to pray: **“Why do you hide your face?” (13:24)...** **“My spirit is**

broken, my days are extinct...” (17:1) “If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness, where then is my hope? (17:15) He dares to trust that *however* long it takes, and in whatever shape or form it might be, God *will* respond and be true to God and to him.

- I remember struggling with some hard texts about suffering in a group last year -and whether – or how- God might be involved in it all. After what seemed like hours (and not really getting any further towards understanding anything any better) a Jewish friend suddenly interrupted us all, saying, “You know what I find really difficult about you Christians, is when you try to justify God. Let God speak for *himself*.” I found it incredibly helpful.
- And the thing is, when the breakthrough moment finally happens with/for Job, it’s a complete surprise: it’s not at all how he’s expected it. Far from the rational discussion and answers he had imagined in his calling God to account, the ‘answer’ is in an overwhelming *whirlwind*, with God letting Job glimpse him afresh: the glorious, majestic power and creativity of God, together with his tender, intimate love.
- And Job’s response is **“I know that you can do all things.... And that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...” (42:1-2)**
- In the case of the young Dad I was telling you about, it means facing and being true to his worst dreads with God so that, not *what if* (what if it is cancer? Or what if we lose him?), but *even if*. *Even if* his little son does have to go the way of suffering and death, God will be weeping with them and will give each of them the grace to get through it... tenderly and yet powerfully transforming their pain and suffering into new hope and joy – however difficult it is and however long it takes.
- That’s the work and power of the resurrection Spirit in us.... God will never give up on us.
- That’s what Jesus (described as the High Priest in the Hebrews reading) is crying out/praying on our behalf all the time...the one who’s agonising with us, *longing* for us to know and share in the truth and fullness of his Father’s love – and the fullness of his life.

- We need to open ourselves as fully as we can to the life and energy of his Spirit in us so we can be *surprised* and take in more of his glory!
- That's the transformation that takes place in and through Jesus' grappling in Gethsemane and Job's honest, agonised grappling with God...
- He's someone who opens himself to the 'word of God which is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' – the Word that cuts through to the heart of things: to what *really* matters – where we really need it.
- And just listen to Job when God's voice finally breaks through: "I *had heard* you, but now *my eye sees you!*" This is a completely *new level and way* of seeing and knowing.
- It's like the disciples after the resurrection, isn't it? "When Jesus appears among them and opens their hearts and minds to knowing and understanding how the scriptures are being fulfilled in new and mysterious ways... Mary, hearing Jesus voice in the garden calling her by name.... or Thomas being invited to touch Jesus' side... or the disciples on the Emmaus Road, who, when Jesus takes bread, blesses, breaks it and gives it to them burst out 'Were not our hearts burning within us when he was talking to us and opening the scriptures?'" It's not just about *literal*, physical hearing or seeing, it's "*I see!*"
- It's what St Benedict calls 'the inner eyes and ears of our hearts' – what are known as our '*spiritual*' senses: stretching and developing our capacity to take in the Divine in all its mystery and glory.
- It's what enables the deep knowing that helps us move from 'Lord, please don't let this happen to me...' to a place of total surrender and trust, where, no matter what, we can say, "Into *your* hands O Lord, I commend my spirit..." for I know that *you are God* and that you are *good*.
- That's what *Jesus* knows and is why he can say so confidently to his disciples (who are struggling to understand the way and glory of the cross and how it could possibly be worth all he's asking of them):

‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age...and in the age to come.’ (Mark 10: 29-30)

- It is worth *everything: especially* whatever might most get in the way of our loving and living first and foremost for *God*: loving God for *God’s* sake.
- We have to be *willing* to give it up. We wont always have to, but we have to be willing to: that’s what counts.
- It’s too much to take in, isn’t it? It doesn’t *make* sense at a very rational, logical or human level.
- But that’s what Jesus is promising: riches and treasure *beyond* our imagining. **“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for (and in) God, all things are possible.”**
- So as we prepare to receive afresh his life and love in bread and wine, let’s remember all those who are struggling to hold hope and trust in God’s goodness, and let’s pray for our spiritual senses to be awakened more and more fully, as we pray (in the words of St Benedict):

Gracious and Holy Father,
 please give me: intellect to understand you,
 reason to discern you,
 diligence to seek you,
 wisdom to perceive you,
 patience to wait for you,
 ears to hear you,
 eyes to behold you,
 a heart to meditate on you,
 a tongue to proclaim you,
 a way of life pleasing to you, and perseverance to look for you.
 Through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
 (St Benedict of Nursia)

Job 23 'Job Replies: My Complaint Is Bitter'

Then Job answered:

- ² 'Today also my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.
³ O that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
⁴ I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
⁵ I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
⁷ There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge.

⁸ 'If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

- [¹⁰ *But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.*
¹¹ *My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.*
¹² *I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.*
¹³ *But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?
What he desires, that he does.*
¹⁴ *For he will complete what he appoints for me;
and many such things are in his mind.*
¹⁵ *Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.]*

- ¹⁶ God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
¹⁷ If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

Psalm 22 'Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility'

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

- ³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- ⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- ⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
- ⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- ⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- ⁸ ‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’
- ⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
- ¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
- ¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
- ¹² Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
- ¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
- ¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
- ¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

Hebrews 4:12-end ‘The Rest That God Promised’

*Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,
‘As in my anger I swore,
“They shall not enter my rest”’,
though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. ⁴For in one place it*

speaks about the seventh day as follows: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’⁵ And again in this place it says, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’⁶ Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience,⁷ again he sets a certain day—‘today’—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day.⁹ So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God;¹⁰ for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labours as God did from his.¹¹ Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Jesus the Great High Priest

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mark 10:17-31 ‘The Rich Man’

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’¹⁸ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.¹⁹ You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”’²⁰ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

28 Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’²⁹ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or

sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’