

# Job

This morning we are going to look at the book of Job... now what comes into your head when I talk about Job... is it a book that you read often, or is it one of those books in the Bible that you tend to avoid.

It is a book which is meant to be about the question of suffering, and who wants to look at that?

This morning we are going to look at Job, which increasingly has become one of my favourite books in the Bible. I think as I have got a bit older and seen a bit of life, I have come to love Job all the more. So if you have gotten wearied, experienced, jaundiced, middle-aged perhaps, then Job is a good book for you.

The teenagers have got their story – it's David and Goliath. Children have got their stories – the story of Jairus daughter, the story of Noah perhaps. The ninety year olds plus have got the story of Abraham. For the cynical and wearied have got the book of Job.

Job is a book of five acts.

The first act, the prologue, happens up in heaven, where a sharp and acidic procurator, the Satan, suggests to God that the only reason that Job is nice to him, is because God and Job have a sweet deal going with each other. And by extension, the Satan is accusing God of playing favourites, but also suggesting that God and of God's self is not particularly loveable, we only love God because he can get us the things we need. That's a fascinating and intriguing question, and one that we are going to come back to.. do we love God because of God, or do we love God in order to secure God's benefits.

The second act, is deeply distressing, because God allows calamity to come up on Job and he loses first of all his oxen and donkeys – it's like the modern equivalent of a plant hire business, and that is all gone. Then he gets news that fire from heaven has killed all his sheep – so he is a sheep farmer, or rather he was. Then he hears that a warrish band

called the Chaldeans have moved off with all his camels – so his long distance haulage business has been destroyed – so much for Job’s plans to protect himself from disaster through diversification. And then finally, tragically, he hears that all his children have been killed when a great wind came across the desert and blew down the house where his children were dining and they were all killed.

At this Job appears to be unbroken. So at the Satan’s behest a second wave of calamity comes against Job’s own body, he is inflicted with sores all over his body; Job’s wife is enraged at his stoicism, and says “now is the time to curse God”, but Job refuses. And his friends come and sit with him for seven days.

In Act 3, which is by the far the longest Act, Job finally cracks – he curses the day of his birth; for the next 35 chapters his friends cannot cope, they lambast him for his sins, they attempt to get Job to break, to admit that this is all his fault, that to suggest otherwise would be to be impugn God, with religious orthodoxies which could all be justified from verses in the book of Deuteronomy and the beloved psalms, they try and get Job to see the error of his ways, and he refuses.

Then in Act 4, God appears – “who is this who darkens my counsel?” he says of Job has he describes his own knowledge of nature. The rhetoric is soaring, the images beautiful and terrifying, but also the conclusion, which on one level seems to be “who are you to argue with me?”

And finally in Act 5, Job yields, he turns to God, broken; then a surprising verse – God turns to the friends and says “you have not spoken right of me as Job has”, and Job will offer sacrifices on your behalf; and Job is restored, he is given sons and daughters, and sees his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, lives to 140 and the book ends by saying “Job died, old and full of days”.

The end.

What to make of the book of Job.... Because on one level it’s a fairy tale – it will be alright in the end.

The on another level it's disturbing – bad things will happen to you, but don't mess with God, and once you accept, you'll be alright again.

But then on another level, those who say these things, that if you honour God you'll be okay are the most criticised and unsympathetic characters in the whole of the book. Their speeches are boring, and even God cannot be doing with them. That incredible verse, Job 42:7, where God says that his wrath is kindled against the two friends.

That speech by God, is what unlocks the book for me; because it tells me that we have to look for something less than obvious, we have to probe with the book. In fact there is an intriguing chapter in the book, verse 28, where it says that knowing the wisdom of God, is like going mining, you have to go the very depths.

And this brings us to the reason that I want us to look at the book today.

Because I am intrigued, and challenged as to how our Church can find its message for this day. You will know that for years, the impression of Scottish people was that God was like the Rev IM Jolly, with his dull platitudes. It completely turned people off. But the answer is not to choose more funky music, because if the message underneath is still tired and cliched, then it does not speak to life.

And this is the challenge, to find a faith that is honest in it's approach to life.

It is to find a faith, which has the raw honesty of Job's speeches, of which God says "Job spoke of me which is right", which I think applies to all of Job's speeches, not just the speech at the end.

And here is the irony, the test, that in speaking honestly of God, God will argue with us.

For our relationship with God to be real, it has to have some tension in it.

You see that there are lots of the book of Job I would like to be different.

I don't want him to suffer – although I am glad that story is told, because I have known people, and you have to, who have had everything happen to them.

And I wish that Job's friends were less religiously orthodox, although I am glad that they are, because they get pulled up in the end; and any time that I think that the future for the Church is to spout the right answers with greater certainty, I remember Job's friends.

But the bit that I really want to change is the bit where God comes in, because I want God to come in and say “Right Job, everything is okay, I do love you, this was a test, and now it’s over, and I am really sorry about everything that happened to you, and I understand why you got so upset, and now we’re going to be friends again.”. But if God utters not one word of sympathy for Job.

This is my take on the book of Job, this is why I love it so much.

I think one of the great themes is about being seen, being known.

And as Job screams and resists a false narrative about why he has got into this trouble, he refuses to see it as a response to his sins, he articulates his truth – he is so post-modern – in great poetry, he demands to be heard.

In this he reminds of one of my great heroes of the New Testament, the blind man who is healed in John chapter 9, who is harangued by the Pharisees who are like Job’s friends, to stick to an orthodox story, and to blame Jesus, because Jesus has healed on a Sabbath, and that blind man are inherently sinful; and the blind man replies with “I do not know if he is a sinner, but I know this, I was blind but now I see”. That’s my story. And then goes on to say “never since the beginning of the world has it been the case that someone has healed a blind man, but this man has let me see, he has to have been from God.”

God wants us to articulate what we see, however, uncomfortable that is, how ever painful that is, however unreligious that is.

But here is the thing also, God wants to be seen.

And God wants to be connected. God seeks that coming together, of honesty, intimacy with us, God wants to be known. God as God is. God whom we discover when we got to the depths. Not the God we are meant to be known as.

God has this really strange image that he uses to confront Job. He starts to talk about a mysterious animal called the Behemoth, which sounds awful like a hippopotamus. And another animal called a Leviathan which sounds awful like a crocodile. And with both of these awesome animals, he asks the question, can you snare these, can you take behemoth with a snare; and you take it with hooks; and with Leviathan can you draw it out with a fish hook.

Job has been criticised as a book, because it appears that God seems to respond to the question of human suffering by talking about crocodiles.

But I am intrigued by that fish hook metaphor. You see when you catch a fish on its hook, you know that it is alive, you feel its' very movement, you sense connection, you come into contact with wildness, which were it not for the line, you would never have known was there; and my understanding is that it is exhilarating, it is spiritual. Because spirituality is all about connection.

Now imagine if instead of a fish on the other end of that line, it was a hippo, or a crocodile, how much life would you be in touch with there.

No what happens if the thing on the other end of that line is God?

That is what Job's experience is, that he encounters God, and if we encounter God, then somehow we are enabled to know him. As a wild entrancing encounter.

And then we are ready to speak and share, with language that will not satisfy the religious orthodoxy test, but will create intrigue of a world and a people who want to know God. We will be able to share our faith, of the wildness of God, who created the world, who became one of us, who died for us, defeated death for us, and yearns, yearns, yearns to be known.

Let us say yes to God

And may God give us the opportunity to tell the story

So that others might say yes to God also

AMEN