

## Sermon for Proper 7, Year B

### The Text: Job 38:1-11

What's your best source of comfort when you suffer loss? For many people there's no book of the Bible that speaks more helpfully to them in their loss than the Book of Job. It's been called a masterpiece of literature with a contemporary feel about it. Its honest examination of all the raw emotions we experience when overtaken by loss gives its readers the idea that someone else knows how they feel. This agonisingly honest book reveals sympathy for sufferers unmatched elsewhere.

Job suffered in the vital areas of family, health and material possessions. Just when he thought he was doing everything right, everything went wrong for him. He refused, however, to accept the role of victim.

Satan sought to discover if Job served God out of self-interest, because of all the blessings God had given him, or out of an unconditional trust in God. Nowhere in Job's debate with his three friends over the reason why there is suffering, did he place his hope in his wealth, his friends, his own wisdom or experience. His protests of innocence gave him no relief.

Job never entertained the thought of giving up his faith in God. Rather, he desperately wanted to experience God's active, healing presence in his life, as he questioned what God was doing and cried out to God for some relief from his heartache. Job represents to us everyone who seems to be suffering more than seems necessary. A church leader, when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, gained immense strength and comfort by having a chapter of Job read to him every day in the last weeks of his life. He appreciated the way the author of this book gave no easy answers to the question of why some seem to suffer more than others.

Since God is God, he will do many things we cannot comprehend, and will act in ways we don't always understand. A God we could fully understand would be no God at all. The Bible links the mystery of suffering with the mystery of God. It sees suffering as a communication from God, rather than as a punishment for specific sins we might have committed. The Book of Job doesn't make light of life's unfairness. It points out that life's unfairness doesn't call God's goodness into question.

If there was no suffering, how would we develop compassion? If there were no emergencies to handle or crises to deal with, how would we develop courage? When things go wrong for us, we can too quickly conclude that all of life is unjust and unfair, because our loss swamps our perspective on life.

A mother whose son was killed in a car accident, rose early on the morning of the funeral to read God's reply to Job in Job 36-41. She said: "I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world". Her anguish threatened to swallow all of creation. What she needed was the reassurance of a God whose power of creation and re-creation is stronger than the power of what seems chaotic and haphazard in our lives. This is what God's reply to Job seeks to do for such a confused sufferer as Job was.

God aims to persuade Job of the fundamental reliability of the structures and systems of creation, in the face of the unpredictable events that occur in a world marred by sin. God's reply itself was unpredictable. God doesn't answer any of Job's questions. Instead, God has a range of questions for Job, to get him thinking differently, very differently from how he had been thinking. In a sense, God's appearance to Job is the true answer to Job's deepest needs. God had been listening to Job's cries for help. God wasn't unresponsive to all that Job had been going through. First of all, God lifts Job's focus from his own experience into the vastness of His complex creation. God takes Job through the marvel of a forest to watch His obedient infant, the sea, and then to view the wonder of the stars at night.

God tells us that He is purposeful in what He is doing in His creation, pervasive in His control of it, and personal in His care for it. He shows us that caring for the whole creation is something only God knows how to do. With playful irony and touches of humour, God reveals to us His delight in all He has made, especially in creating animals and birds of no practical use to us. God's reply is a defence of the ecology of nature and the proper use of the environment. God made wild animals to enjoy their existence in the wilderness, just as much as God enjoys watching them and providing for their unique needs.

There are deer whose freedom God wants us to preserve; there are animals God doesn't want us to tame. His creation has more variety than we need because it is there for our enjoyment, and not just to be exploited. God invites us to share the morning star's song of joy over what God has made (Job 38:7). Weather is arranged not just for us, but also for God's other creatures. In nature, God is doing a host of things right each day, things that have little or nothing to do with us human beings. God's humorous sketch of the ostrich in Job 39:13-18 serves no solemn purpose. It acts "silly" because that's how God created it. It, in turn, laughs at our so-called "progress" (Job 39:7).

God's joy in His creation is reflected in the leisurely nature of the tour He takes Job on. By doing this, God helps Job to recover a place of security and belonging within the rich panorama of creation. Job himself has acknowledged that he is sure of his safety with God the other side of death. "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last He will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another (Job 19:25-27a)." Our Redeemer living again was the unexpected outcome from Good Friday.

The events of Good Friday demonstrate to us that God hasn't abandoned us in our pain and our loss. Human suffering is so significant that God shares it with us. Job's sufferings point to those of our suffering Saviour Jesus Christ, God's ultimate demonstration of justice. Jesus suffered without consolation and comfort on the Cross, so that His suffering might be our comfort in our own suffering.

Our sufferings come to us to make us Christlike: "We suffer with Christ so that we may also be glorified with Him (Romans 8:17)." Through suffering, we discover that Jesus is our first and greatest need, both for the present and for the future. Our suffering has meaning and value beyond all that we can comprehend in the present. Job learned that we cannot evaluate God's actions on the basis of the small piece of reality we experience. We can, however, trust God for the bigger picture – that He has all the loose threads of the lives of all His creatures in His hands.

A couple fostered three children whose lives had been devastated by witnessing their mother kill their father, and then being arrested. On the first night the children were in this couple's care, they read together the creation account in Genesis 1. The husband explained that the children had experienced such a sudden and violent loss that they needed to know there was something on which they could still rely. To hear about God's well-ordered, good world in the presence of adults who would stand by them, was the first step to restoring a sense of trust in these children.

God's message about creation serves a similar function with Job. Life's problems need good, close relationships with others rather than merely good reasons for why things happen. The Book of Job tells us to avoid judging the sufferings of others. Instead, we're to ask the Lord to lead us to those who suffer like we have, and to listen to them and pray for them. Our own burdens are easier to bear when we help others bear their burdens.

"Lord, you are our help in trouble; in darkness, come as light; in our sadness, come as joy; in our troubles come as peace; in our weakness, come as strength. Redeem, renew and restore us. Amen."