

The Book of JOB – by Helen Poole – 19 August 2011

Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?

It's a question high on the list of those who look around at so much suffering in the world and simply find it impossible to believe in a good and just and loving God; and it's a question that surely most of us have asked at some time in our own lives...How can God possibly allow this to happen?

Do you remember some years ago when Cardinal Basil Hume stood in the middle of a sea of suffering in Africa and was asked that same question, and as the reporters waited for his definitive explanation, he simply said "I don't know". We don't know, but of all the books in the bible, the book of Job is, I think, the most helpful. It doesn't give an easy answer or explain it all away, but it gives us a companion and a journey: a companion in our questioning and an extraordinary journey of faith ...and in the end, of hope too.

The book of Job is a story, set out in dramatic form...

Job is a good man, blessed with a large family, riches and friends but above all in his strong faith. But when God tells the devil how proud he is of Job, the devil issues a challenge: of course it's easy to be faithful and virtuous and God-fearing when you're surrounded by blessings, but suppose it all gets taken away, then where will your great so-called faith be?

So God accepts the challenge and agrees that Job's faith can indeed be tested; and in a series of disasters Job gets tested to the limit.

He loses everything: his possessions, his children and his health and when there's nothing left for him to do but to sit in the ashes, in total desolation, covered in boils from head to foot, scraping himself with bits of crockery for some relief, even his wife says enough is enough, *do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.....*

His three friends come to comfort him and first of all behave in the most compassionate way: they say nothing but just sit in silence with him for seven days and nights: *for they saw that his suffering was very great.*

But then they begin to assure him that he must indeed have done something terribly wrong to deserve this fate, and if he will only admit his guilt, God will make it all better;

And Job steadfastly refuses to give in. He simply won't accept their explanations, he knows he hasn't done anything to deserve this terrible punishment and he refuses to curse God; instead he curses the day he was born. And from the 3rd chapter onwards, both sides put forward their case and seem to get nowhere until at last all Job can do is cry out to God in anguish and insist on an answer.

If only God will just say something, it doesn't seem too much to ask. Why this silence? Why is this happening? Why he was even created? And why are we on this earth anyway? What's the point of it all?

But the great thing is, that in all his bewilderment, questioning, lamentation and desperation, just as you feel he can't take any more, his faith breaks through... there it is, again and again, somehow surfacing from the very depths of his being and the very depths of his pain, that wonderful ringing declaration ..from someone who just will not have it that the God he worships in not just, is not good, and is not for him rather than against him.

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he shall stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God

If you've never read *The Enduring Melody*, Michael Mayne's honest heart-rending but beautiful account of his own struggle with terminal cancer, then do get a copy. That same underlying faith, surfacing even in his darkest journey, shines through and is an absolute inspiration.

And for poor old Job, at last, in chapter 38, after all the argument and all the wrestling, at long last God does answer him... *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth??* and then in the fabulous account of the wonder and the power and magnificence of creation (and this is where the evocative poetry of the KJV truly comes into its own), at last Job is silenced..

Because what God is saying is *Trust Me*.

If we can't even understand the mystery and the pain of creation, how on earth shall we understand the mystery and the meaning of our suffering?

Sometimes, in the testing times, that really is all we can possibly do: just hold on to our faith for dear life and trust; trust that even when we can't understand what's going on, God is with us even in the very worst places and never never leaves us...And sometimes too, in accepting that there are some things here that we humans simply cannot know, there is a certain humility and a precious gift of peace.

The story of Job, like any good story, yields more every time you read it and it's intriguing to discover so many of our modern-day expressions.. and like any good story too, it ends happily ever after. Job's fortunes are restored, his faith is vindicated ...and we're left holding on to those wonderful words

I know that my Redeemer lives

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