



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**16 February 2020: Choral Matins**

**Sexagesima**

**Job 38:1–21, Colossians 1:15–20**

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**‘Faith and the Suffering of the Innocent’**

Earlier this week I was surfing the world-wide web in search of a decent prayer about the coronavirus epidemic. The first one that came up was Irish and composed in 1888. But it seemed rather melodramatic, and surely not appropriate to our circumstances: "O Star of Heaven, beloved of the Lord, drive away the foul constellation that has slain the people with the wound of dreadful death. O Star of the Sea, save us from the poison-breath that kills, from the enemy that slays in the night". But then my eye fell on other material about plagues in history. The Black Death of 1347-51 is reckoned to have killed between 75 and 200 million people in Eurasia, including up to 60% of the population of Europe and maybe a third of English men and women. New College here in Oxford stands as a monument to that plague, since it was founded to replenish the English Church with educated clergy in its aftermath. While this country has since never suffered any natural disaster quite as devastating as the Black Death, the Great Plague of 1665-6 is reckoned to have cost London 15% of its population. Then the terrible Irish Famine of 1845-9 may have killed up to a million and, together with subsequent emigration, reduced the population of Ireland by up to a quarter. And let's not forget the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918-20—yes, a safe one hundred years ago, but still within my parents' lifetime—which is reckoned to have killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide, including almost a quarter of a million Britons. We are accustomed to think our modern selves invulnerable to lethal disease on such a dreadful scale. And, mercifully, since the discovery of penicillin in 1928 we have been. But bacteria are clever little things, and they are learning to resist penicillin.

All this was in my mind when I began to look at the readings appointed for today. And when I read our passage from the Book of Job, the question naturally arose of how to make sense of faith in God, when faced with natural disasters such as epidemics or pandemics. In the light of history, the effects of the coronavirus have been comparatively

slight, so far. To date, almost 60,000 people have been infected in China, and only 1,400 have died; and in the rest of the world there are less than 500 known cases of infection. Still, if relatively tame, the epidemic reveals to us that the immunity we tend to assume is really not as secure as we think. And it raises again for us the old, but still unpacified, question of how to make sense of faith in God in the face of the suffering of the innocent.

What answer does the Book of Job give us? First of all, let me remind you of the story. Job, we're told in the opening verse of the book that bears his name, "was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1.1). One day, however, Satan challenges God to test Job's faithfulness, insinuating that it depends entirely on God's continuing to serve Job's interests. "Does Job fear God for nothing?", asks Satan, rhetorically. "Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (1.9b-11). So, God takes up the challenge, and gives Job over into Satan's power. As a consequence, Job suffers a series of calamities, culminating in the death of all his ten children, alienation from his wife, and his own affliction with disease. Dismayed at his distress, three of his friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—go to console and comfort him. The rest of the book consists of a dialogue between Job and his friends, and, in the end, with God himself. Throughout, the question in play is how to explain Job's suffering.

Job's friends do their best, and they are pastorally wise enough to respect his dreadful plight, and not to belittle it. Indeed, to begin with we're told that "[t]hey sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (2.13). Nevertheless, Job's friends do proceed to try and explain why God permits a righteous man like Job to suffer, but in each case the explanation fails to satisfy.

In the end the Book of Job gives an answer that is not an explanation. Indeed, it's an answer that is designed to dismiss the demand for an explanation. Here it is:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it? ...  
Or who shut in the sea with doors  
when it burst out from the womb? ...  
Have you commanded the morning since your days began,  
and caused the dawn to know its place,  
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,  
and the wicked be shaken out of it? ...  
Have you entered into the springs of the sea,  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?  
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,  
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?  
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?  
Declare, if you know all this.

The answer that God gives Job is not an explanation. Instead, it undermines his seeking one. It puts Job in his place as a mere creature by posing a series of sarcastic, rhetorical questions. In so doing it hints, first of all, that his personal suffering is perhaps not so very important in the Grand Cosmic Scheme of things. Although some might find that implication brutal, I, on the contrary, find it quite refreshing in an age when felt personal suffering and exploited victimhood are regarded as ultimate authorities. My parents belonged to a war-time generation when serious, lethal suffering was so very common that dwelling on one's own personal woes was regarded as disproportionate and indecent. So, they didn't talk about it; they just bore it. And I admire them for that.

But God doesn't only imply that little Job's suffering is really not all that important. He also says explicitly that little Job is really not capable of comprehending what God is up to. After all, God is God, not Man. He is divine, not human. So, it really should not surprise that God's ways often seem to us a mystery:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?  
Declare, if you know all this.

Yet, there is a very important third part to the answer, which is implicit in the structure of the whole story. Remember that Job suffered only because God permitted Satan to test him. God remains ultimately in control. And this is a God who himself recognises Job's

righteousness, and in the end, he vindicates it. For, in the closing verses of the book we are told that “the Lord restored the fortunes of Job ... and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.... The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning” (42.10, 12a).

So, first, lift your eyes up and away from your little self. Second, remember that, since God is God, his ways are naturally beyond human comprehension. And, third, keep faith in God, that he will do justice in the end. This is the threefold answer that the Book of Job gives to the agonised cry of the afflicted righteous, ‘Why is this happening to me?’

To this threefold answer from the Book of Job, our passage from the Letter to the Colossians adds a fourth. For, that pins down some of the mystery of God and his ways, telling us that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God”, in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” and “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible”. So what is revealed through Jesus about God and the suffering of the innocent? What is revealed is that the resurrection of Jesus is a token of the justice that God will do. Jesus was himself an innocent done to murderous death on the cross. And yet his suffering was not the final word, since Jesus was raised, “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead”.

In conclusion, let me summarise the answer our texts give to the question of how faith in God should view the suffering of the innocent:

First, lift your eyes up from yourself and your little suffering.

Second, remember that, since God is God, his ways are naturally beyond human comprehension.

Third, keep faith in God, that he will do justice in the end.

And fourth, ground your faith in the resurrection of the innocent victim, Jesus, which is a past and present token of the justice yet to come.

All that does not amount to a full explanation. The questions, Why me? Why us? Why this? Why now?, are usually unanswerable. But if our readings—indeed, if Scripture—does not give us a full explanation, perhaps it still gives us a sufficient answer to live by.