3 November 2019: Choral Matins
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Job 26, Colossians 1.9-14
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‘In the Prison, the Free Man Praising’

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, and will vanish as soon as things turn bad. “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, his own affliction with disease, and alienation from his wife. Dismayed at his distress, three of his friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—seek to console and comfort him. The rest of the book consists of a dialogue between Job and his friends, and, in the end, God himself.

Throughout, the main 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, in each case explanation fails, and in Bildad’s case, it irritates. Bildad proposes that no one can be righteous before God, all mortals being maggots and worms. The unflattering implication is that Job is getting no less than he, a maggot, deserves, that cosmic justice is being done, and that God, therefore, has no case to answer. Job’s response—which opens in our first reading this morning—is bitterly sarcastic:

How you have helped the powerless!
How you have saved the arm that is feeble!
What advice you have offered to one without wisdom!
And what great insight you have displayed!
Who has helped you utter these words?
And whose spirit spoke from your mouth? (26.1-4)

In the following chapter Job affirms his righteousness, and the narrator’s perspective suggests he’s not wrong. After all, right at the very beginning, we were told that Job was indeed “blameless and upright”. So, the question of justice remains in play: Why does the righteous Job suffer? Why, as Job himself put it, has God taken away his right? (27.2).

The Book of Job never gives a straightforward, intellectually satisfying answer to the question it raises. Which is why it deserves our respect, since anyone who has wrestled with the question knows that no easy answer lies to hand. But it does give an answer of sorts, and it comes in three parts. One part is to lift Job’s eyes away from himself and his own suffering and up to the marvellous, incomprehensible power of God. Thus, after its sarcastic opening, Job responds to Bildad by contemplating God’s cosmic power:

- He spreads out the northern skies over empty space …
- He wraps up the waters in his clouds …
- He covers the face of the full moon …
- He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters … (26.7a, 8a, 9a, 10a)

Observe: the eyes are turned upwards. So, one part of the answer to Job’s suffering is to get it in proportion, by lifting his eyes up from his own misery to the heavens. In the Grand Cosmic Scheme of Things, Job’s distress is actually a small matter.

A second part of the answer is to remind us that 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. As the final verse of our reading commented, after presenting instances of the divine might, “These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” (26.14).

The answer’s third part 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 acknowledges Job’s righteousness, and in the end, 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 yourself. 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?’

Reflecting on this morning’s first reading, I found myself reminded of the poetry of W. H. Auden, who, as many of you will know, spent several parts of his life here in Christ Church, and worshipped in this cathedral, as the plaque in the Chapel of Remembrance commemorates. In a poem he wrote in 1950, “Precious Five”, I hear distinct echoes of the Book of Job:

I could (which you cannot)
Find reasons fast enough
To face the sky and roar
In anger and despair
At what is going on,
Demanding that it name
Whoever is to blame:
The sky would only wait
Till all my breath was gone
And then reiterate
As if I wasn’t there
That singular command
I do not understand,
Bless what there is for being,
Which has to be obeyed, for
What else am I made for,
Agreeing or disagreeing?

As in the Book of Job, so here the heavens put Auden’s outrage in its modest place: “The sky would only wait till all my breath was gone, and then reiterate as if I wasn’t there …”. As with Job, so too Auden finds himself seized by a divine mystery, though in Auden’s case the mystery is something specific: “That singular command I do not understand … which has to be obeyed, for what else am I made for … ?”. This is the command to “bless what there is for being”, to rise up from out of one’s own personal distress and acknowledge the basic, enduring goodness of God’s great world. So for Auden, as for Job,
part of the answer to his distress is faith that, under God, the goodness of things will persist and, in the end, triumph.

I find this faithful, hopeful, eyes-uplifting self-transcendence to be beautifully, bravely honest. It’s both brave and honest in allowing feelings of personal pain to be disciplined by exposure to larger truths. We find it again in another of Auden’s poem, “As I Walked Out One Evening”, written ten years earlier in 1940. Here Auden struggles with the pain of betrayal by his lover.

O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.

“O look, look in the mirror”: suffering inclines us to turn in upon ourselves; it has a narcissistic bent. But Auden rises bravely and honestly above his felt pain, to acknowledge larger, objective truths. The first truth is that life remains a blessing, even when we don’t feel it: “Life remains a blessing, although you cannot bless”. The second is another command—to love, even to forgive, as we have been forgiven: “You shall love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart”.

Auden rises up and out of his personal pain to acknowledge larger truths. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these truths, to which Auden opens himself, raise him up and out of his pain. The truths, and the realities of which they speak, save him. Remember: “That singular command I do not understand … which has to be obeyed, for what else am I made for …?” Responding to the truths, acknowledging the commands—these are what we are made for. These are what fulfil us. These are our salvation.

In the same year that he wrote “As I Walked Out One Evening”—1940—he also wrote, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”, to mark the death of the famous Irish poet. This contains the following verses:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;
With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.
In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

“In the prison of his days teach the free man how to praise”: learning how to praise in prison creates the free man. It liberates, it fulfils, it saves.

This is not the whole answer to the question of human suffering, of course, but it is, I think, an important part of it. And it’s all the more important in a culture such as ours that encourages us to identify ourselves with our felt pain and to use it to dominate others—rather than rise above it in obedience to the salutary, liberating commands to give thanks and to love our neighbour.