

At this time of year as we celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving, it is one of those ‘feel good’ times of the year when we recognise God’s goodness towards us as in the decoration of our Churches we are reminded of the richness and variety of God’s provision for us in the context of the natural world.

But we would all recognise that there are situations in life when God’s goodness is not so readily apparent. This morning we are reading the first of a series of lessons from the Book Job. These remind us of other circumstances when God’s goodness and faithfulness are not so readily apparent.

The book Job is the story of a righteous man who falls upon great suffering. the origin of that suffering seems to be the height of injustice. In the heavenly courts God has remarked upon the faithfulness of his servant Job. Satan remarks that Job is faithful when all is going well for him – but take away health, wealth and family and Job will curse God like the rest.

In the story we are presented with, for reasons that we can only speculate upon, this is allowed to happen and Job is reduced to despair. Three friends hear of his plight and they go to visit their friend. For some considerable time they just sit with their friend and then seem to feel that they must do something. In a series of speeches they each in turn challenge Job to look back over his life. His present suffering, they argue, can only be the consequence of some grievous sin in the past. Recognise the sin, confess it and all will be well.

Job for his part cannot see anything in his life that points to his present plight. Job’s problem lies in a sense of isolation from God. If he can but meet with God, if he can present his case, if he can know that he has been heard – then things will fall into place.

This I think is what often lies at the heart of the problem of suffering. the feeling of being alone, cut off from God. I often think back to the introduction to a book on prayer in suffering that I first came across some years ago. The author had lost his father when eh was still at school. He spoke of a numbness and desolation that came to a climax when, eighteen months later, he was studying music in Rome. He spoke of a visit to the great Basilica of St Paul without the walls one wet December afternoon. He writes:

‘When I went there teenagers were playing football in the park and hurtling around the piazza on motor scooters. I was suddenly gripped by a terrible loneliness; and when I entered the vast and dimly lit basilica with its eighty marble columns and gorgeous mosaics I was overwhelmed, not just with awe but with anger, at the God who had taken away my father and yet seemed to enjoy dwelling in buildings of such icy magnificence; anger too at a world which could go happily about its business as heedless of my loss as God was. I gave vent to my feelings in tears of fury and self pity; and neither the laughing footballers nor the God of the great basilica took any notice. Yet I was left with a strangely clear awareness that it was all right to be angry and lonely and to say so – and that, in some inexplicable sense, what I had said had been heard.’

(Out of the Deep – page 2)

Like Job he didn’t get any answers, but he felt he had been heard by god. he had broken through the isolation of the opening words of our Psalm, that cry of loneliness attributed to Jesus in the darkness of Calvary.

Therein lies our point of contact. As we are reminded in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews this morning. The God we worship is not remote from our experiences of pain and suffering, he is a God who knows what it is all about, who has experienced in the person of Jesus all the trials and tribulations of this mortal life. Some one we can indeed approach in confidence to find grace and mercy in time of need.

Job's friends were encouraging Job to look for meaning to his suffering in something that had happened in Job's life. Job knew instinctively that that was the wrong approach – he sought meaning by seeking the presence of God. At the core of the Christian Gospel is a similar recognition that ultimately meaning and purpose are not to be found in anything that has happened in my life – rather we find that ultimately that meaning is to be found in something that happened in God's life, in the death and resurrection of Christ, in fellowship with him, trusting in him, we approach with confidence the throne of grace.

If you will bear with me, I will close with another quotation that I have used before. They are the closing words of the biography of Lord Hailsham, former Lord Chancellor, 'A sparrow's flight'

'And, lo, a paradox appears. I seek God, and behold a bedraggled humans figure impaled for ridicule upon a cross. I despair of man, and behold the same figure, enthroned in majesty above the clouds. If I go up to heaven he is there. If I descend into the depths of misery and grief, he is there also. He is Alpha and Omega, the source of my being and the end of my pilgrimage. He is love, at once the beloved and the eternal lover. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, at once the creator, the redeemer, the inspirer of suffering humanity, the companion on my way and the strengthener of my steps. But he is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. he is unknown and unknowable, yet constantly revealed, revealed in nature, in beauty, in goodness, in knowledge, but always absent in the negative, the hated and the hateful. he is always present yet constantly eludes my grasp. Being infinite, he cannot be comprised in my understanding. Nevertheless as constantly he reappears in my need. Remaining Christian, I am constantly reassured in my wandering, in my doubting and as constantly lead back by my trusting. I do not know. I do not pretend to know. But I trust, and therefore I believe. Now I see through a glass, darkly. The time is not far distant when, infinitely contrite, I must seek the mercy of an infinitely compassionate judge, and the, face to face, I shall know, even as I am known.'

A Sparrow's Flight – Lord Hailsham p 452