Sermon by Stephen Linton - St Mark’s 1030 10/10/2021

**The Absence of God: Suffering**

Job 23: 1 – 9, 16 – 17; Mark 10: 17 – 31

I wonder if you watched the programme last week to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Songs of Praise on the BBC? 60 years is an amazingly long time for any programme to run, and it’s good that this one has survived, and every week about a million people still watch it. One of the hymns last week was sung by presenters Aled Jones and Katherine Jenkins: ‘Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here’.

It’s a popular modern hymn that reminds us as we gather for worship that God is here, with us this morning, receiving our worship and wanting to speak to each one of us if we will only listen. Be still for the presence of the Lord is here. But what about times when we no longer sense God’s presence? What about times in our lives when God is seemingly absent? Can we still believe and trust in him, when our prayers seem to be ignored, our hopes dashed; or at times of suffering or bereavement or doubt or despair? What then?

Today’s reading from the book of Job is about someone in just that predicament. Job has lost his family, his livelihood and his health. And there seems to be no explanation for his misfortune. His so-called friends say that he must be to blame; that this is God’s punishment for his wrongdoing. But Job can’t see that. If this suffering has come from God, then why has it been necessary? If only he could speak to God and put his case. If only he could ask God the big question, ‘Why?’ If only. But God is seemingly nowhere to be found.

Job says, ‘If only I could find him, I would find out what he would answer me. But if I go to the east he is not there, to the west I do not find him; when he is at work in the north I do not see him; when he turns to the south I catch no glimpse of him.’

And it’s a question that faces us all today. Why does God allow suffering? Why doesn’t he prevent those natural disasters that we see on our TV screens? Why do illness and death seemingly strike randomly, affecting good people and evil people indiscriminately? Surely an omnipotent God could prevent these things? But he doesn’t, so it may seem to us that either he doesn’t care, and then he is not all-good; or he doesn’t know, and then he isn’t all wise; or he isn’t able to, and then he isn’t all-powerful. So is the God of the Bible, the God of Christianity a myth? Does his apparent absence tell us that what we are doing this morning is not only a waste of time, but a tragically false hope?

We will come back to God’s answer to Job in a moment. But first, here are some clues to the problem of suffering. Clues, not answers. Suffering will always challenge our faith in God. But I hope that these clues may be helpful as we too face some of these problems in our lives today.

Firstly, it is clear that many of the world’s disasters and much suffering are man-made. Our greed or neglect or exploitation of our environment and our fellow-creatures causes famines, wars, changes in climate and natural disasters. Is God to blame for that?

Secondly, it seems that suffering can sometimes have positive outcomes. It calls us to pay attention to the things that really matter. We can learn from and in our suffering. We can emerge better and wiser. And many of our greatest writers, musicians and artists have known suffering. In a funny way it seems to result in enhanced creativity, from which we all benefit. In a world of no suffering the characters would be more like happy robots.

And thirdly, great suffering can result in greater faith. Most of the great Bible characters suffered in some way. Think of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and today of Job. Out of their experiences have come examples, writings, faith and trust in God that can inspire us today.

And fourthly, we ask why God doesn’t intervene to prevent tragic events? But think through the implications of that. What are we asking him to do? Think of the drunk driver who kills an innocent pedestrian. Are we asking God to knock the drink from his hand, or alter the laws of motion, or grab the steering wheel? What would our lives be like if God did that? No, the essence of being human is to have free will, to make our own decisions, and yes, those decisions may have bad consequences, for us and for others, but that is the way God has made us. With freedom to choose what we do. And do we expect God to provide those of us who follow him with miraculous immunity from all catastrophes? When we say, ‘Why me?’ perhaps we should be saying, ‘Why not me?’

So what answer did God give Job? Towards the end of the book, God, whom Job thought was absent in this morning’s reading, suddenly appears and for 4 whole chapters we can read what he has to say. So what was God’s answer? But we find that God gives no answer to the question, ‘Why?’ Instead, God simply reveals his greatness, his majesty, is overwhelming power and glory. ‘Look at me, Job’, says God. ‘See how wonderful, powerful, almighty I am. Look at the world around you, from the microscopic to the great wonders of the universe. Look at how I made it and how I still control it all. Just look at me’.

And Job replies, ‘Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you’. There is no answer to the question, Why? God says, ‘Just look at me, and trust me’.

But finally, in the New Testament, we find another clue. God’s answer to suffering is seen in Jesus. God identifying himself with us by sharing in our suffering. Do we weep? Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Do we feel rejected? Jesus was despised and rejected. Do we feel maligned? Jesus was accused of being illegitimate. Do we know broken relationships? Jesus was betrayed by a friend. Are we lonely? Jesus’ friends forsook him and fled. Are we in pain? Jesus was tortured. Do we fear death? Jesus died for us.

When children are in pain or ill or have been disciplined, they may come to us crying, seeking not so much an explanation as reassurance that we still love them. So when we come weeping to God we may not receive an explanation for our problems, but we will be assured that he loves us, and that we can trust him. And we see that love most profoundly in Jesus. And even when God seems to be absent, we can be still and know that the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here, as we look to God suffering for us in Jesus, our Saviour.

We’ve looked at some clues, but we haven’t solved the mystery of suffering. In this life I don’t think we will ever do that. But as Christians we have hope of God’s final definitive answer in eternity, where we read in the book of Revelation of a renewed heavens and earth with no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

In 1974 my sister died from leukaemia aged 21. Her name was Joy. And my parents chose part of a verse from Psalm 16 to be engraved on her tombstone: In your presence is fulness of joy. The pun was deliberate. They felt that in some way their beloved daughter Joy was fully healed in God’s presence. In your presence is fulness of joy. When our loved ones die, and when we die, we have that great hope. That in God’s presence we will know the answer. No more mourning or crying or pain.

And this morning we anticipate that as we remember in our Communion service, what Jesus has done for us. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving. May the body and blood of Christ keep us in eternal life.

Let’s pray. Father help us to know your presence with us each day, whatever our circumstances. Give us your peace and your presence when we suffer. And as we take Holy Communion this morning may we indeed know the joy of your presence as we feed on you in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving. Amen.