

Sermon – 16/08/2009 pm

The Man from Uz

Study Text: Job 1:1-5

‘That fellow has the patience of Job’. Have you heard of this saying? Maybe it is not used as commonly as it once was. The saying is based upon the Biblical character called Job. His patience, or rather his perseverance, is highlighted in the New Testament book of James. We read there the following words: *You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord – that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful* (James 5:11). Job is the Bible’s example of a man who perseveres in the midst of adversity, a man who clings to God when others give up saying ‘curse God and die’.

Who Was Job?

This book is about a man called Job, from the land of Uz. His name comes by transliteration of Hebrew so is not to be confused with the English word of the same spelling. His name means ‘persecuted one’ or ‘hated one’. In Aramaic however it means to come back or repent. Job lived a long time ago, probably in the time of the patriarchs. He was a rich man as measured by the number of his livestock, just like Abraham. He was also priest in his own house like Abraham, and lived to be 140 years old.

Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldeans before going to Canaan. Job lived in the land Uz, the greatest man among all the people of the East (1:3). The east means east of the Jordan River, but this is a vast area from Mesopotamia to Arabia. Being raided by the Chaldeans (1:17) is a further indication of an area around where Abraham once lived. Yet we cannot be precise about who Job was or where he lived. We can be certain however that he did live in Uz and that he was a man who feared God.

Job had seven sons and three daughters, a perfect family. He had 7000 sheep and 3000 camels. These numbers point to a certain completeness in his property portfolio. His children would get together to celebrate birthdays or the like. They would eat and drink together with all propriety, but just in case they sinned Job would get up early the next day and make a burnt offering to God. He would make atonement for their sins.

Job was particularly concerned that they may have cursed God in their hearts – not just in something they said but even their thoughts. Job knew that God was the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity and whose name is holy (Isaiah 57:15). He knew God as the Almighty. Even though he later questioned God he never spoke against the Almighty, even when his wife urged him to do so. Satan’s attacks, which brought great suffering in Job’s life, were also designed to provoke Job into cursing God. How terrible it is to hear men and women, and even boys and girls, blaspheming God’s holy name. Imagine the number of burnt offerings that would have to be made in some homes if there was one for every time God was cursed.

We do not make burnt offerings today of course because Jesus offered himself once for all as the sacrifice for our sins. But let us not think that sin is any less serious. We do not see and smell a burning offering for our sin, but we do see Jesus Christ the Son of God nailed to the cross because of our sin.

Though riches and fame make it difficult to enter the kingdom of God, this was not the case with Job. We are introduced to him as a man who feared God and shunned evil (1:1). He was blameless

and upright. 'Blameless' does not mean 'perfect' (as in KJV), or being without sin. 'Blameless' indicates a man of personal integrity and honesty, a man of uncompromising ethical conduct. Calamity upon calamity suddenly fell upon such a man. He lost everything and then got terribly sick. How come? It's not fair? How can God let this righteous man suffer? Do you have an answer?

The Book of Job

The book of Job is unique in a number of ways, but it has always been part of the canon of Scripture. It is present in the manuscripts discovered at Qumran. What is interesting is that in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, the book of Job is markedly shorter. Material from the speeches has been omitted, possibly because of difficulties in translating unusual Hebrew terms.

The book of Job is unique not just because of its content, but also because of its style. It begins with two chapters of prose/narrative, in what we call the prologue, and ends with another chapter of prose, the epilogue. In between are 39 chapters of dialogue in the form of poetry. Poetry is a feature of the wisdom literature and this book belongs to this section of the Old Testament. It is included along with Psalms and Proverbs in the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible.

In terms of content this book is also unique. It takes us behind the scenes as it were, behind the scene of life in this world. We are taken into the court room of God. In a vision the apostle John was given a glimpse into the throne room of heaven. He described a throne and one sitting on this throne. He saw a multitude coming before the throne for judgment (Revelation 4:2, 20:11f).

While there are many differences between Job and John's vision, in both we see created beings coming before the throne of God to give an account. In Job the focus is on the counsel of God, on the conversation between God and one of the angels he created. This angel is called Satan, meaning the adversary or the accuser. The subject of this heavenly counsel was the man called Job. Neither Job nor his friends were privy to this conversation.

Themes in Job

The dominant theme of this book is the problem of suffering. Not just suffering but a good man suffering. We have no difficulty in seeing a wicked person suffer. In fact, from a sense of justice, we expect the wicked to suffer. But we have great difficulty in understanding how good or innocent people can suffer. We can tell ourselves no one is innocent, which is true, but is not a completely satisfactory answer.

Those who do not believe in God say whatever happens to us is just chance, but they know this is not a satisfactory answer either. Many are led to despair by this question – why do innocent people suffer. For those who believe in God the problem can still be acute and sometimes very real. It is not made easier by the teaching of some that becoming a Christian means you will have a happy trouble free life and that you will not get sick.

'When bad things happen to good people' was the title of a book I once saw. It was given to a friend who was going through a very difficult time. He was a leader in our Christian fellowship. His sister had joined him in college and was also in this fellowship. She got depressed – very depressed. One day she went missing. She was last seen walking towards the flooded river. She has not been seen since. This young man had reason to ask 'why?' His father was shattered because like Job's friends and many others, he reasoned that bad things only happen to bad people or sinners. I don't know if the young man read the book or if it helped him. But like God's people down through the ages he turned to the book of Job for help.

If God is all powerful, if God is good, if God is just, how can he let the innocent suffer? Job's friends clung tenaciously to the rule of divine retribution, of a person reaping what they sow. They told Job to get down on his knees and repent of his sin. But Job clung just as tenaciously to his belief that God was not punishing him for some unconfessed sin. He did not know why he was suffering and kept asking God why. Job did not 'give up on God'. He persevered in pursuing God for an answer.

Although we as readers are told why Job was suffering, he was not. God did answer Job in the end but in different terms. Job was reminded of the sovereignty of God. He was reminded that God is sovereign in creation. God is the sovereign ruler over all creation and all creatures. The Westminster Confession of Faith (2.2) expresses this truth in the following words.

He (God) is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever he pleases. In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.

If there is one truth that is not being taught in the church today it is that of the sovereignty of God. Thousands go to church thinking they are doing God a favour and that God will reward them for this. They expect that God will make them, and keep them, healthy and wealthy – not necessarily wise. They are shattered if any suffering comes their way. Their prayers are not so much petitions as demands. They rebuke the spirit of sickness in the name of Jesus and declare that the sick person is now better. If the person does not feel better it is because they lack faith. Where is the sovereignty of God is all this?

Job did not rebuke his sickness – nor did his friends for that matter, although they persisted in telling Job it was because of his sin. In the end God simply called Job to be humble and trust God. In the end God blessed Job more than in the beginning? God is sovereign. He knows the beginning and the end. *You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord – that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful* (James 5:11).

'It is one of the abiding lessons of the book of Job that Christians can expect to suffer. Even if the cause of suffering remains a mystery, the fact of it does not' writes Thomas. And further 'If we can learn to persevere, even in the face of the incomprehensible ways of God in our lives, we shall have learnt the supreme lesson of the book of Job'.

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