

Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

If you ask the internet what are the top three questions asked about God, the number two answer is, 'why does God allow suffering?'. Probably not surprising. The presence of suffering, destruction, and pain is difficult for us to square with our faith in a God who is love. It's a conundrum that has driven many people away from faith, and a few towards it. But wrestling with the question of suffering is unavoidable, because we are all brought face to face with it at some point. What theology can answer this question? How do we wrap our heads around the presence of suffering in the world?

The book of Job is a deeply theological musing on the nature of God. It's also kind of problematic. As Virginia Woolf wrote to a friend, "'I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out of it well.'" And that seems true. It's the story of God allowing, even encouraging, the extreme testing of one of his most faithful servants, to see what happens.

Now, scholars agree that Job himself is a paradigmatic human - it's not a literal story about an actual person,

but a representative parable of someone who has it all, then loses it all, and explores faith and God and human relationship to the divine along the way. But it's still unsettling.

In fact, it is so unsettling that someone added a happy ending. Originally the book of Job ended without any sort of resolution, but one ancient writer tacked on the final few verses where Job is rewarded with a return of wealth and a bunch of new children, to try and make this ancient writing a bit more palatable. I'll leave it up to you whether that actually improves things or not.

But the book of Job ponders the nature of God and asks the question - why do bad things happen to good people? What does one say about God and faith in the midst of undeserved and extreme suffering?

One answer that is clearly debunked is the idea of 'retribution theology', which is where good people get good and bad people get bad. That's the theology Jesus comes up against when he heals the man who was born blind. 'Rabbi', ask his disciples, 'who sinned: this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'. Neither! Is the answer. Suffering cannot be simply equated to retribution for sin.

Instead Job is blameless and upright, a person of deep faith who turned away from evil. Yet, despite his integrity, he faced immense suffering. He lost his livelihood, his children, and his health. Job becomes the very image of despair, and while he avoids the sin of cursing God, there is plenty of anger, grief, and depression which pours forth in the subsequent chapters to what we heard this morning.

Now I feel I need to apologise that I'm not going to give you a nice neat answer. There's a reason it's one of the most asked questions, why God allows suffering, and that's because there is no satisfying solution. But if Job teaches us anything, it is that God continues to be God, through whatever we experience. God continues to be mysterious, beyond comprehension, and yet also right there with us in strangely personal presence.

The reading from Hebrews today speaks of Jesus himself experiencing suffering and death. God himself partaking in what it is to be human, to wrestle with all that we go through, to ask the questions 'can this cup be taken from me?' and 'my God why have you abandoned me?'. Jesus knew what it was to be one of

us, and joined us in our sufferings. And through it all, God continued to be God.

So we may find that the question needs to change. To be human, to live in this world, to experience joy and love and hope and fulfilment, simply goes hand in hand with loss and pain and grief. It is all wrapped up together and through it all God continues to be God. God himself continues to be with us in it all.

So instead we ask, what is our response? Or what should our response be?

Job finds himself working towards a more profound understanding of the divine, and a faith which is tested and strengthened. And that's not to say that holding onto faith during tough times is easy. There are moments when despair feels like the easier option, when anger seems more accessible than hope. And that's okay. Faith isn't about having all the answers or never experiencing doubt. It's about choosing to trust, even when the path ahead is unclear. Job answers his wife, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In the midst of overwhelming hardship, Job chose to hold onto his faith, and chose to respond with integrity no matter what happened to him.

So what is our response? When we face destruction and loss, when our neighbours are suffering, what do we do with our faith? I would suggest that we have seen an outpouring of faithful action in the last few days. We have seen and been part of neighbours helping neighbours, strangers offering assistance to others, communities coming together to start rebuilding. Even in dark times, God godself is with us, and shines through us, and offers a loving foundation of steadfast presence within us.

Victor Hugo writes that 'Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise', which sounds kind of familiar. It's reminiscent of a gospel writer who says 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it'.

For our faith is one of light. Our faith is of that stubborn, resistant, resilient spark which gives hope in the most hopeless situation. Our faith is in a God who continues to be God, Godself among us knowing suffering alongside joy, a God who, it is true, does not stop suffering, but is always there when we find ourselves face to face with it.

Why does God allow suffering? There isn't an easy answer. But what do we do with that? That is the question to seriously ask ourselves. How do we become living testaments to God's unyielding presence, upheld by hope and courage in the face of despair?

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. That's us. That's our call, that is our faith, that is our God.

Amen.