

Battle and Banquet Minster E'song 19/715

Job 13¹³ - 14⁶, Heb 2^{5-end}

Come now and dwell with us, Lord Christ Jesus, hear our prayer and be with us always. Amen

Job 13²² "Then call and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me."

The Primary School hall is hushed as the headmaster strides into the room to conduct morning assembly. 100 pairs of plimsolled feet cease shuffling, and muted giggles and whispers fade away. "Good morning everyone!" "Go-od Mo-rning Mr Brown!" The children are asked to sit down, and after more wriggling and shuffling, the familiar instruction is given "Hands together and eyes closed!" The room falls silent and only the most daring and disobedient child dares to peep between his or her fingers. The atmosphere has changed. There will be no silence in the entire school day quite like this one. It's deeper than the quiet that falls on the dinner queue, or the one that follows the playground whistle. This is the silence of prayer- for many of the children, and maybe for some of us too, this is the very first experience of it. Or maybe we first became aware of it at home, beside our beds, like Christopher Robin: "Hush, hush, whisper who dares, Christopher Robin is saying his prayers!"

Is that how we still think of it- saying our prayers? What is prayer for us now, all these years later, now that so much water has flowed under our life's bridge? A cumbersome duty? A reciting of other people's words? Something that we wish we could spare more time for, if only we weren't so very busy? Something other people do so much better than we can? Something we try hard at but somehow it seldom feels quite right? Or the deepest and most wonderfully joyful, renewing and sustaining experience we can ever have? The saint, priest and poet George Herbert described prayer as follows:

"Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age, God's breath in man returning to his birth" or again "Softness, and peace, and joy and love and bliss, exalted manna, gladness of the best, heaven in ordinary, man well dressed."

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Prayer as a heavenly banquet in our ordinary world. Maybe it's like that if you're a saint, you may be thinking- but what about the rest of us? Well, the truth is, whether you're a saint or not, it's likely that before the banquet there'll be the battle! There's a favourite hymn which says *this* about saints and their prayer lives: "These are they whose hearts were riven, Sore with woe and anguish tried, Who in prayer full oft have **striven** with the God they glorified." Jacob, you remember, wrestled all night with God, so that thereafter he and the whole people of God were called *Israel* which means 'the one who strives with God.'

George Herbert only arrived at his deep understanding and appreciation of prayer after a long spiritual journey. He was a nobleman, in the royal court, famed for his public speaking, but he left the limelight behind to become a humble parish priest in a tiny Wiltshire village. He dedicated himself to God and used his supreme artistry with words and language to express the richness of his faith. All the while he struggled with the illness which led to his premature death.

In about the 4th or 5th century BC, another poet, we don't know his name, took a folk-tale that was going around at the time and turned it into a powerful narrative poem. We heard part of it for our Old Testament reading. It's about a character named Job. Job's livestock, his servants and finally his sons and daughters are struck down by an appalling series of accidents-lightning, hurricane and marauding bandits. Job bears it all with great fortitude and patience. Finally, Job himself is smitten with a particularly painful type of leprosy which covers him with boils from head to toe. His wife was no help whatever. Her terse advice was for him to curse God, so that God would surely strike him dead !

Her attitude was based on the prevailing idea of the time that all suffering was God's punishment for sin. Job's friends, his so-called comforters, held the same view. If Job would only confess his wrongdoing, his suffering would cease. Job would do no such thing, because he knew he had done nothing to deserve what had befallen him. The whole book of Job is a battle of ideas, exploring the mystery of suffering and why innocent people suffer.

When we are in a place of pain, perplexity and anguish, the temptation is to behave like a hedgehog. To curl up and hide our intimate, vulnerable, hurting self and present our prickles to everyone else, especially God. This feels safe, but it's intolerably lonely and scary. There can be illogical guilt feelings too- "What have I done to deserve this?" As difficult as it may be, the only way to be helped and healed is to dare to open up, maybe to a friend or minister or counsellor at first, but ultimately to God himself. It's vital to remember that God knows the situation already, so there's absolutely no purpose or necessity in being anything other than totally up front and honest. We can dare to be who we are, where we are, and say precisely what we think and feel. This is exactly what Job did. He put his case to God and boldly asked: "Do not let dread of you terrify me. Call and I will answer, or let me speak, and you reply to me." Job poured out his grievances before God. But the only answer the poet depicted him as receiving from the Almighty was a bald statement of God's omnipotence and majesty "Shall a fault-finder contend with the Almighty? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" Job submitted, and accepted that he had to stop questioning and simply let God be God.

There may be times when that is all we can do too. But we are immeasurably better placed than Job when we do so, because we are this side of the cross. The Old Testament author of the book of Job wrote of God as he knew him at that time. We approach God in the brilliant light of the Gospel, and see his true nature revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. The power of the cross is limitless and eternal.

The Revd Judith Crane is an Anglican priest, author and powerful speaker. As a child, Judith suffered sexual abuse. This left her with deep emotional and spiritual hurt, and an overwhelming sense of anger with God who had allowed her suffering and degradation to happen. She writes 'The fury will attack even God when the wounded soul is threatened beyond bearing'.¹

When we are sorely wounded and at rock bottom, how do we picture the God whom we cry out to? Envisaging an omnipotent male authority figure will not comfort us, especially if we are female. We need to look to God-in-Christ as we see him in tonight's passage from Hebrews. In Jesus we see all we need to know, or can know, about God's character and will. Jesus is the fulfilment of all the hopes and promises of Israel; he is the creative power that shaped the cosmos; he is the human embodiment of the essential being of God. He laid his glory aside and endured incarnation,

humiliation and death, sharing our flesh and blood to bring us to glory. He had to become like us in every respect, Hebrews says, 'so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people '.

As Judith Crane contemplated the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, she experienced that priesthood in the most intimate way. She hurled all her anger and hurt at Jesus, and his love released her from it. She forgave God and he forgave her. Her sufferings were taken up into his. God reconciled her to himself and she was healed and restored.

I am standing here as a Reader today because of a time about 30 years ago when the cross of Jesus turned my life around. I too was at rock bottom, for very different reasons from Judith's, which some of you may have heard me speak about before. I knelt in front of a crucifix and called upon Jesus as God. He took my agony and mingled it with his own, set me on my feet and gave me this ministry. I continue to be amazed and grateful.

In Jesus we see what the theologian Paul Fiddes calls " The creative suffering of God ". He writes: The story of the cross discloses the love **and the wrath** of God in a new way; the death of Jesus , in the context of his life and resurrection, enhances our capacity to respond to God, and such response is the very stuff of which true existence is made. "² Our Holy Communion service celebrates all this – a banquet of prayer , a foretaste of our feasting in heaven.

If we are honest and persistent in our relationship with God , and maintain our dialogue with him, no matter what life throws at us ,our battles with him will bring us to his banquet.

In another poem , called "The Collar" George Herbert described how he thumped the table, defied God and rebelled:

"But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild ,at every word,
Me thought I Heard One calling "Child ! "
And I replied: My Lord ! "Amen

Diana Watkins

1. Judith Crane " Forgiving God " Grove Spirituality Series Booklet S 90 www.grovebooks.co.uk
2. Paul S. Fiddes "The Creative Suffering of God " OUP Clarendon Paperback ISBN 0-19-826347-3