

Once every three years the Bible readings for Evensong in the summer are from the Book of Job. Not the whole thing – just the highlights. You may already be thinking that ‘highlights’ is not necessarily a word you’d associate with a book which starts with a series of disasters, and comes up with very few answers as to why Job suffers the way he does. The book is real about the human condition: we are ‘born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards’. In speech after speech Job and his friends try their best to explain it all, and all fall short. The best description I have read says that it does not seek to explain suffering, but probes its mystery.

In Chapter 19 Job simply describes what it feels like to him. He cannot for the life of him think why, but sees that God has put him in the wrong. ‘He has kindled his wrath against me, and counts me as his adversary’ (19.11). He complains that his friends add to the burden rather than give help, and he’s got another 20 chapters of this to go. You perhaps will not find it hard to think of situations where something awful has happened to someone for no apparent reason. The world is like that sometimes, and sometimes people around don’t help in the way that they should. At their worst people can start explaining why it’s happened, when they should really roll up their sleeves and get on with being friends. People are at their worst, and best, in a crisis.

Reading Job is not like reading a book of philosophy, which stands back from the world and tries to put things in some kind of order. Job is like reading a first-hand account of what it was like to be in an earthquake, of a fire, or in a war zone. Job, in Chapter 19, simply tells it like it feels.

Everything is awful. He even has bad breath so that his wife won't go near him and his family hate him. In such a situation you would not be human if you didn't ask 'why?', but you are so tied up in it all that it's impossible to get the necessary perspective. Even at the end of the book Job is not given an answer, but rather a vision of the majesty of God. There are more things in life than the answers to our questions, says God.

What Job never stops doing is talking to God, and about God. He has every reason to abandon a belief in God completely, but he never does. He doesn't know why, but he knows that all that happens to him is within a relationship with God. In that sense his 'faith' never wavers. Many people would see the end of Chapter 19 as conclusive proof of that. 'I know that my Redeemer lives', he says, 'and that at the last he will stand upon the earth...after my skin has been destroyed I shall see God'. It wasn't difficult for people in the early church to see this as a prophecy and foreshadowing of the resurrection, and Handel's *Messiah* makes this the centrepiece of resurrection faith.

It's not clear that, in its original context, Job was thinking in exactly these terms. The image is much that of a law court, where a 'redeemer' would ensure that the penalty was paid and someone found guilty was freed from their sentence.

But even seen in this way Job's faith is remarkable. Despite all that has happened, despite it feeling that even God is against him, he knows that there will be justice in the end, that God will not let him go. Because, as the end of the book makes clear, God is God. God is, as Job puts it, 'on my side'. God has not gone away, however much it feels like it.

I last preached on Job six years ago, on the anniversary of York Minster's South Transept Fire. Commemorating the events of 25 years before brought home to me again that faith in God does not immunise us from trouble, but enables us to look to God's presence in the very heart of it. York's south transept seems almost more special because it has been destroyed and rebuilt. That is a hard thing to say to those who are living with the most horrendous devastation in their own lives or the lives of those they love, but I have been struck time and again by the testimony of people who have said to me what I would not dare say to them: that God has not let them go, that there is comfort and hope in the tiniest glimmer of faith and the presence of friends, that there is life when the outward signs only point to despair.

And, from the other side of the resurrection, our faith does have a focus. Jesus was at the very centre of the suffering of the whole world. In that law court it was as if God was his adversary. Through his suffering and death Jesus was placed at the heart of the world's trouble and devastation. And we know that our redeemer now lives. My prayers are with all those whose suffering is great.

May we be a place of refuge, and may all who suffer know the hand of God in their darkness, such that the light will shine all the brighter, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.