

Last Sunday our Church was decorated for our Harvest Thanksgiving. This is one of the ‘feel good’ times of the Church year in which it is easy to recognise the richness of God’s goodness towards us as in the decoration of our Church, the flowers, the produce, the sight, the smells we are reminded of the splendour of God’s creation.

we would also recognise that there are circumstances in life when God’s goodness is not so readily apparent. Our Old Testament lesson, one of a series from the book Job over these next few Sundays, points to other circumstances in life when God’s goodness and faithfulness are not so easily recognisable.

The Book Job is the story of a righteous man who falls upon great suffering. The origin of that suffering seems to be the height of injustice. In the heavenly courts God has remarked upon the faithfulness of his servant Job. Satan remarks that Job is only faithful when all goes well for him – but take away health, wealth and family and he will curse God like the rest.

We find Job, stripped of health, wealth and family, reduced to despair. Three friends hear of his plight and they go to visit their friend. For some considerable time they just sit with their friend and then obviously feel that they must do something. In a series of speeches they each challenge Job to look back over the past. His suffering, they argue, can only be the consequence of some grievous sin in the past. Recognise the sin, confess it and all will be well.

Over the years, as I have visited those who are seriously ill, or have faced some tragedy in life, there is the inevitable question of why me, what have I done that could possibly have brought this upon me? On occasions the suffering has been heightened by an anxious review of the past as the individual tries to identify some sin of sufficient magnitude to explain their predicament. The story of Job is a warning against such an approach; the

frantic search for some real or imagined fault as an explanation some particular suffering can in fact hinder the search for meaning rather than help it.

Job, for his part, cannot see anything in his life that would point to his present plight. His problem is his sense of isolation from God. If he can but meet with God, if he can present his case, if he can know that he is heard – then things will fall into place. This I think lies at the heart of the problem of suffering – the feeling of being alone and cut off.

I often think back to the introduction to a book on prayer in suffering that the Ballymena Clerical read over the course of one winter. The author had lost his father while he was still at school. He spoke of a numbness and desolation that came to a climax when, eighteen months later, he was studying music in Rome. He spoke of a visit to the Basilica of St Paul-outside-the-walls one wet December afternoon. he wrote; ‘When I went there .... teenagers were playing football in the park and hurtling around the piazza on motor scooters. I was suddenly gripped by a terrible loneliness; and when I entered the vast and dimly lit basilica with its eighty marble columns and gorgeous mosaics I was overwhelmed, not just with awe but with anger, at the God who had taken away my father and yet seemed to enjoy dwelling in buildings of such icy magnificence; anger too at a world which could go happily about its business as heedless of my loss as God was. I gave vent to my feelings in tears of fury and self pity; and neither the laughing footballers nor the God of the great basilica took any notice. Yet I was left with a strangely clear awareness that it was all right to be angry and lonely and to say so – and that, in some inexplicable sense, what I had said had been heard.’ (*Out of the Deep* – page 2)

Like Job, he didn’t get any answers – but he felt he had been heard by God. He had broken through the isolation of the opening words of our psalm, that cry of loneliness of Jesus in the darkness of Calvary.

Therein lies our point of contact. As we are reminded in the reading from Hebrews appointed for today; the God we worship is not remote from our experiences of pain and suffering. He is a God who knows what it is all about; one who has experienced in the person of Jesus all the trials and tribulations of this mortal life. Some we can indeed approach in confidence to find grace and mercy in our time of need.

Job's friends were encouraging Job to look for meaning to his suffering in something that had happened in Job's life. Job instinctively knew that that was the wrong approach – he sought meaning by seeking the presence of God. At the core of the Christian Gospel is a similar recognition that meaning and purpose are not to be found in anything that has happened in my life – rather we find meaning in something that has happened in God's life, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, through whom, trusting in whom, we approach with confidence the throne of grace.

If you will bear with me I will return to words I have quoted before of the late Lord Hailsham, one time Lord Chancellor in the UK, writing in the closing pages of his biography, *A Sparrow's Flight*:

‘And, lo, a paradox appears. I seek God, and behold a bedraggled humans figure impaled for ridicule upon a cross. I despair of man, and behold the same figure, enthroned in majesty above the clouds. If I go up to heaven hi is there. If I descend into the depths of misery and grief, he is there also. He is Alpha and Omega, the source of my being and the end of my pilgrimage. He is love, at once the beloved and the eternal lover. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, at once the creator, the redeemer, the inspirer of suffering humanity, the companion on my way and the strengthener of my steps. But he is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. he is unknown and unknowable, yet constantly revealed, revealed in nature, in beauty, in goodness, in knowledge, but always absent in the negative, the hated and the hateful. he is always present yet constantly eludes my grasp. Being infinite, he cannot be comprised in my understanding. Nevertheless as constantly he reappears in my need. Remaining Christian, I am constantly reassured in my wandering, in my

doubting and as constantly lead back by my trusting. I do not know. I do not pretend to know. But I trust, and therefore I believe. Now I see through a glass, darkly. The time is not far distant when, infinitely contrite, I must seek the mercy of an infinitely compassionate judge, and the, face to face, I shall know, even as I am known.'

*A Sparrow's Flight – Lord Hailsham p 452*