

Suffering and Mystery

An exposition of the Book of Job

by Dr Roy Clements

There can be no doubt that many people would find it easier to believe in God were it not for the problem of suffering. It is self evident that there are many things in the world that contradict a breezy confidence in an omnipotent and loving God. Suffering poses intellectually and emotionally disturbing questions.

Some suffering, of course, is the direct result of human folly or criminal action: child abuse, road accidents, terrorist bombs, nuclear accidents—these are all arguably "our fault". But there is an enormous amount of suffering additional to this which is not our fault at all: tsunamis and hurricanes, cancer and mental illness, famine and drought ... the list could go on. And even when the suffering can be attributed to human crime, it is rarely those who commit the crime who endure it; almost always it is the innocent who are the victims.

There is so much in our world that seems to be characterised by pointless and undeserved pain—and it all poses the same question to any honest Christian: Why God? Why do you let it happen?

Bertrand Russell, the Cambridge philosopher of the mid-20th century, I guess spoke for many in his pamphlet "The faith of a rationalist" when he wrote:

"I can imagine a sardonic demon creating us for his amusement, but I cannot attribute to a being who is wise, beneficent and omnipotent the terrible weight of cruelty, suffering and ironic degradation of what is best that has marred the history of man."

It is not hard to sympathise with such scepticism; how on earth is a believer to respond to it?

There are two ways that they can respond actually:

The first is to go on the defensive: to clutch the Linus blanket of theological orthodoxy and religious tradition and close the mind to these unwelcome questions that threaten the security of the creed. Such a response amounts to a retreat—a retreat into what Bertrand Russell would probably have dubbed "intellectual suicide" or "blind faith".

I shall call this the "bury your head in the sand" approach: "never mind the evidence to the contrary—just believe there is a loving and almighty God in charge of the world".

The alternative to this is to go on the offensive: to look the problem of suffering in the eye and have the courage to ask those awkward questions, to challenge those conventional answers. Instead of running away from doubt, this approach wrestles with it.

I shall call this the "turn your face to the wind" approach—"if I'm going to believe, it will be a faith without blinds spots, without intellectual no-go areas; a faith that confronts reality, no matter how uncongenial that reality may be".

Ever since I was a new Christian it has been important to me that when you look in the Bible you find encouragement to join the latter camp. The Bible emphatically does not bury its head in the sand regarding the problem of suffering, though it must be admitted that many Christians do.

In fact, the Bible repeatedly presents to us men and women of faith who confront the problem of suffering with courage and candour—who are not afraid to ask the question "Why God?"

And the classic example of that, of course, is Job.

In the opening chapters we are told in a prose section that Job was a righteous man, but for some reason which is never fully explained God permits Satan to strip him of all his blessings:

- his wealth is taken away
- his children die in a tragic accident
- he himself falls victim to a painful, disfiguring, chronic disease
- eventually even his wife turns against him—"curse God and die" she advises him.

All these things happen, we are told in that opening prologue, by God's permission. That is a very important element in the background to the book. For one easy solution to the problem of suffering that is embraced by a number of philosophies and religions is dualism.

Dualism says there are two equal and opposite forces in the world—one good and the other evil. They are locked in perpetual tension; so all the good things that happen are due to the good force, and all the suffering is due to the bad force.

It sounds a very plausible theory. Indeed, some Christians embrace it; they blame suffering on the Devil. But dualism is never countenanced in the Bible. God is the sole sovereign of the universe. His rule may be opposed by evil forces but can never be thwarted by them

Where does the Devil fit in then? According to Job, it is among the angels—as a created being with no power except that which God permits him to have.

Thus we find in Job 1:12 that Satan must ask God's permission to strip Job of his blessings; and when that doesn't work he has to return (in chapter 2) to seek a second mandate. From first to last, Job's situation is never out of God's control—that's the presupposition of this book. What happens to Job, therefore, is in a very real sense, "the will of God". Job himself acknowledges this:

- on the loss of his children: "the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away" (1:20)
- in reply to his churlish wife: "you are talking like a foolish woman—shall we accept good from God and not evil as well?"

Dualism then just isn't on. We can't save God the embarrassment of the problem of suffering by blaming it all on the Devil, because the Devil (like Pilate) "could have no power at all except it were given from above".

Of course this deepens the intellectual problem of suffering, but at the same time it's an absolutely necessary foundation if we're going to enjoy any comfort or reassurance in a

situation of suffering. Time and time again one proves, as you try to help people passing through tragedy, that it is only the conviction that God is in ultimate control of the situation and has some purpose in it all (even we have no idea what), that delivers from total despair. Call it resignation, even fatalism (though I would dispute that word)—we are not cast adrift in an uncertain world where, for all we know, evil might win at the end of the day! Not so— God is in sovereign control of everything—including human suffering. That conviction is absolutely central to what the Bible means by faith.

And it is that conviction that leads us to those two alternative responses to the problem of suffering. We can either "bury our head in the sand" and pretend we can't see it, or "turn our face to the wind" and bravely confront it.

In Job it is the second that is being affirmed, though the other point of view is presented, if only to have it rejected. For the "bury your head in the sand" approach is the school of thought that is characteristic of Job's three friends.

They are introduced in 2:11: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. These three represent a classic example of the "bury your head in the sand" brigade. They are scrupulously sound in the theology, secure in the knowledge that they represent the religious establishment of their day, but they shut their eyes and ears to anything that can't be accommodated within that rigid doctrinal framework.

I think we may allow ourselves to be a little cynical about their declared purpose (2:11) "to sympathise and comfort Job". With friends like that, he hardly needed enemies! Because, of course, they don't in the end sympathise with him at all—they insist that in some way that he must have brought his sufferings upon himself.

I don't think the author intends us to conclude there was insincerity in their motives . Eliphaz is commendably gentle in his opening lines (chapter 4). He says: "We expected better from you, old man. Think of all the good advice you've offered to others in the past. Now it's time to listen to your own advice."

But the problem is that Job's theological position on suffering has changed as a result of his personal experience of it. As the discussion wears on, the friends discover that he is angry and resentful about his situation. He is unwilling to accept their analysis of his problems, and becomes more and more aggressive toward their so-called solutions. As a result, they become increasingly intolerant and hostile toward him—sympathy and comfort yield to rebuke and censure.

The book is structured around three cycles of speeches; each of the friends gives Job the benefit of their advice and Job responds.

Eliphaz, we discover, is a bit of a mystic. He attributes his wisdom to a strange dream he'd had.

Bildad is very much a traditionalist. He appeals to the "church fathers" to substantiate his views.

Zophar is the simple-minded pietist. He mouths super-spiritual cliches all the time and thinks they are wisdom.

On whatever grounds they support their opinions, however, the three "comforters" are one in the theological analysis of suffering that they offer to Job.

Eliphaz spells it out succinctly in his first speech: "those who plough and sow evil, reap it". Job 4:7-8

Suffering, in other words, is a form, of retribution. It is the result of sin. If people suffer it is because they are wicked. The innocent don't suffer, only sinners do. As ploughing and sowing go before harvest, so sin is the inevitable precursor of suffering. Each of the three friends reiterates this fundamental doctrine. Retribution is a divine knee-jerk reaction to anything wicked, a mechanical law of cause and effect like the law of gravity, which nothing can contradict.

But that's the problem—Job does contradict it. Job is an anomaly who doesn't fit their scientific law of retribution. He is a pillar of moral respectability, yet his property has been devastated, his family killed, his health ruined. How are the three friends to cope with this square peg that will not fit in their round hole?

The answer is that they bury their head in the sand. They shut their eyes to Job's self-evident innocence and insist there must be some explanation of his suffering which is consistent with their theory:

Bildad suggests that Job's children had sinned, which fails, of course, to explain Job's own illness.

Eliphaz observes that everyone is sinful, which misses the point, because Job nowhere claims sinless perfection, only that he is suffering out of all proportion to any minor sins which he, like the rest of men, might have committed.

But the one thing none of the "comforters" will do is to give up their theory of retribution. They would rather fly in the face of all they know about their neighbour and believe that he was secretly immersed in some kind of vice. So, with increasing cruelty they are forced into accusing him in this vein.

Eliphaz, in chapter 22, suggests he must have got his wealth unjustly, exploiting the weak and neglecting the poor. They even suggest that by protesting his innocence Job is compounding his sin by refusing to admit it. So it is a no-win situation for Job. Nothing he can say will budge them from this inflexible posture: he must be a sinner, because only sinners suffer.

Job, however, will not be brainwashed into false confessions by their nagging. He will not lie down and stretch himself on the procrustean bed of their theory of divine retribution. They may bury their heads in the sand—but he won't! As he puts it:

"I will never admit that you are in the right. I will maintain my righteousness. My conscience will not reproach me." (27: 2-5)

In other words, I am not going to artificially develop a guilty conscience just to satisfy your theories of suffering. I am a good person, and I don't deserve the treatment life has handed to me. That is fact and I refuse to deny it.

Job reminds me here of Galileo, the pioneer astronomer, who was the first to see the moons of Jupiter through an early telescope. It was heresy in those days to suggest that heavenly bodies circled one another, so Galileo invited the professors of the University of Padua to see for themselves. But, significantly, they refused. They already knew what they believed and nothing Galileo showed them through his telescope was going to make them change their minds. In the end, the Inquisition even tortured Galileo and forced him to recant his novel geocentric theory of the solar system. It was a classic example of scientific observation of the facts banging its head against theological prejudice borne of erroneous theories. And it is the same obscurantist clinging to preconceived ideas that we see here in the three friends. Job has to be a sinner, they argue. They will not look at the facts from any other angle. To do so would be too threatening to their position. They would rather bury their heads in the sand

If I may digress for a moment—I can't resist the observation that all this has some similarity to the current furore in the church over the gay issue. Once again there is a traditional position on homosexuality, namely that it is always and invariably sinful. Any homosexual, therefore, must by definition be morally decadent and God-forsaken. That is the theory. And it does not matter how many spiritually-minded Christian gays the traditionalists are confronted with, that theory cannot be abandoned. These gays must be secretly surrendering to vice on a massive scale, they argue. They would rather bury their heads in the sand over the issue, than consider the painful alternative that maybe their theological perspective on this point is incorrect in some respects.

Those of us who are gay Christians find ourselves in many cases marginalised or even ostracised in the church for the same reason as Job. We contradict their theory. We will not flagellate ourselves with artificial confessions and contrived guilt. We will not bury our heads in the sand and deny our orientation. No, we turn our faces to the wind—even though as in Job's case, it means enduring the intolerance and hostility of those we once called friends.

Well, if Job has advice for us it is this. Don't be afraid to look God in the eye about your sexuality. Tell him exactly what you think, as Job did with perhaps an imprudent candour sometimes.

"I will give free rein to my complaint—tell me what charges you have against me" (10:1-3)

As we have seen, central to the three friends' arguments are two propositions:

1. All the wicked suffer
2. All who suffer are wicked

Well, says Job, both are false.

"All the wicked suffer"? On the contrary—the wicked prosper (21:7-34). It would not be difficult to find contemporary examples that confirm Job's claim: bank-robbers who live in luxury; vicious dictators who die in their beds; child murderers who are never caught. It is unjust world and only a dewy-eyed romantic could suggest otherwise.

"All who suffer are wicked"? On the contrary, says Job, I suffer in innocence, a living contradiction of your theory. In chapter 31, the consummation of his series of speeches, he swears a legal affidavit affirming his innocence. He lists all the charges that his friends

have alleged may be responsible for his sufferings, and solemnly swears "Not guilty" to them. Face the facts, he challenges them: "I am suffering in innocence while thousands of the wicked live in prosperity. Your theory of retribution just leads you into making false accusations against me."

"You smear me with lies." (13:4)

I could have spoken like you once—I could have made fine speeches of the same kind, but something has happened to me now that, like Galileo's observation of the moons of Jupiter, has thrown a spanner into those theological theories I once held in common with you.

You say God is sovereign—well, my experience is that he is arbitrary and despotic.

You say God is wise—well my experience is that he totally inscrutable and irrational.

You say God is just—well in my experience he is not so much just as completely unimpeachable, by definition—the whole ideas of a fair trial is out of the question as far as he is concerned, because he's judge, jury, public prosecutor all rolled in one. He writes the law-book and enforces it. There is no separation of legislature and judiciary is his Bill of Rights. His arguments cannot be contradicted, his verdicts are incontrovertible, his judgements irresistible. Whatever he does, he is accountable to no one but himself.

So let's face it—God can get away with anything! And in my case, he has! How can I trust such a God? On the contrary, I'm scared stiff of him! (23:13-16)

Now, you might have thought with Job's confidence in the goodness and reliability of God so undermined, that, like Russell, he would have stepped out of the community of faith altogether and become an atheist.

A "sardonic demon" is what Russell said, and that us almost what Job calls God in 10:3:

"Does it please you to spurn the work of your hands while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?"

The sarcasm is almost dripping with bitterness there. Yet the unexpected thing is that, though Job's complaints are expressed with great candour and sometimes are so outrageous they border on blasphemy, he never abandons God. In spite of all his affinities with Russell, he never becomes an unbeliever. He is from first to last a man of faith. But a man of faith who will not bury his head in the sand, who insists on turning his face to the wind.

One is reminded of the lines of Tennyson in In Memoriam:

"There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds."

You see, rightly understood, this spiritual struggle that we see in Job is evidence not of the weakness of his hold on God—but of its astonishing tenacity and resilience. His friends are satisfied with theory, content with God as an "intellectual abstraction". They believe in God in the same way as a scientist believes in the law of gravity: God was "an explanation" that enabled them to see logic and order in observed phenomena.

But for Job in his suffering that was no longer enough. Maybe he had been happy with God as a theory before, but now his existential engagement with pain had led him to hunger for something much deeper than that. Job wants a personal relationship with God. He feels that only in the context of such a personal encounter can his agonised questions be resolved.

Again and again, therefore, we find him seeking that kind of relationship. We find him praying, for instance—angry, bitter prayers it is true, but prayers nevertheless. And prayer is something we never find the three friends engaged in. For the one who prays has gone beyond abstract theological reflection and is seeking a concrete audience with God.

And out of the fiery crucible of those prayers, we occasionally find that a sudden ray of assurance emerges:

In 13:15, for instance: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him."

Job rightly observes that the mere fact he wants to talk to God is evidence of his essential righteousness. A man whose conscience is troubled keeps as far away from God as he can. Yet he yearns to have one-to-one dealings with God. It is that yearning that more than anything else distinguishes Job from his three friends and sustains him under the remorseless assault of their cruel and irrelevant advice.

Nowhere is this expressed more poignantly than 23:3-10:

"If only I knew where to find him"

Here is believer, locked in Doubting Castle maybe, and the wind of adversity maybe blinds him a lot of the time, but every now and again he is able to force his eyelids open a crack to see the sun.

Indeed, on one occasion, through that fleeting window of insight, he catches a glimpse of something very few in the Old Testament ever saw—the hope of life beyond the grave and of someone who would plead his cause effectively at God's right hand, not in this life but in the world to come:

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see him, with my own eyes and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"

(19: 25-27)

Such inspired insights take Job's breath away. He knows that God is elusive; if he is to meet him then he must reveal himself. There's no way Job can find him by his own efforts, for journey in whatever direction he chooses, he can never discover the route to God's dwelling place. But, elusive as God is, Job is no longer satisfied with the substitute of man-made theories about God. Nothing less than a personal meeting will now do for him.

And, at the climax of the book, that is precisely what God grants him:

38:1 "Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm ..."

Martin Luther is reported to have chided the humanist scholar Erasmus—"your thoughts of God are too human". A similar rebuke lies at the heart of these final chapters. Part of Job's problem seems to have been that, like Erasmus, he had been over-influenced by the rationalists. They expected the working of God's mind to be fully intelligible to the human mind—like the law of gravity, the workings of divine justice could be unravelled by the human mind. And Job basically accepts this presupposition. That's why he wants to argue his case like a lawyer with God—he expects rational explanations for what happens.

But what he discovers is that such an interpretation of suffering isn't possible, and the impossibility generates a tortuous cognitive dissonance in his mind that underlies all his mental confusion and emotional turbulence.

The irony is, however, that even if it were possible to make sense of suffering within some rational theological framework, that explanation would not actually meet the real need of our hearts. One would be tempted to call it "cold comfort" ; for what Job discovers through his experiences in the crucible of suffering is that theories about God are not enough. He yearns for God himself—the felt experience of God in person—something much deeper than mere philosophy about God. He aspires, not to read God's mind, but to touch his heart!

And in this climactic chapter 38 God offers just such an encounter. He does not try to deny Job's protested innocence; but neither does he yield to Job's demands for some kind of legal hearing of his case. He offers no rational account of his suffering, no moral justification for it. Instead he just drowns poor Job in a deluge of rhetorical questions and ironic challenges.

"You have questions? Well I have some questions for you too: explain the universe in 500 words with examples." (38:4)

"Does Job understand the fundamental forces of the universe?", he asks. Can he outdo Stephen Hawking and unravel the mystery of creation? Has he visited the remotest corners of the globe? Can he master the weather? Can he order the celestial constellations? Does he superintend the wild animals? Can he subdue the mighty hippopotamus or tame the ferocious crocodile?

The barrage of unanswerable interrogation goes on and on. The whole poem is a grand exposition of the wonder of God's world—drawing its illustrations from everything from cosmology to zoology.

What's God's point? Is he trying to reassure Job that there is a rational order in the universe after all? Is he suggesting that there is a framework of scientific logic that is able to provide a total explanation of all phenomena and experience in a way that is totally satisfying to the human mind?

No, if you read it carefully you'll find that, quite to the contrary, precisely those aspects of creation are selected which testify to the incomprehensibility of God's world and of its total irrelevance to any ultimate purpose which God might have:

why should God bother himself with wild animals—what are they for?

what interest does he have in the distant stars—why make them?

why ever did he make such an eccentric bird as the flightless ostrich?

So much of creation seems pointless, as pointless as Job's suffering seem to him. Does this mean then that there is no wisdom in things at all—no grand design—no ultimate purpose? No, of course it doesn't mean that—but it does mean that as far as we human beings are concerned, it is an inscrutable wisdom—a hidden design—a secret purpose.

Perhaps that's why God speaks out of the storm: a natural phenomenon what is the very antithesis of an ordered mathematical system. The storm represents destruction and unpredictability, and it is out of the eye of that whirlwind of irrational chaos that God speaks (38:40):

If you think you have the right to understand everything, Job, why not go the whole hog? Dress up in divine omnipotence and govern the universe yourself! Yes, I could do with a day off! Why don't you take over for a while! If you can do that I'll gladly admit that I've underestimated you. Such an extraordinary intelligence as yours should certainly have been furnished with a full explanation of my actions. How could I have been so remiss as to keep someone as wise as you in the dark!

But then, if you could rule the world in that way, you wouldn't need either my support or my explanations, would you? For you would be God yourself—your own creator, your own deliverer. You would "adorn yourself with glory and majesty"—you could save yourself!

George Bernard Shaw in the 1930's, wrote a pungent apology for atheism entitled "The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God". In one chapter, he scorns the way God speaks here in the final chapters of Job. He ridicules God as a "bad debater", who tries to save himself from defeat at Job's hands by two old barrister's expedients:

"when you've got no case, abuse the opposition"

"when you're case is weak, shout louder"

Job has asked for an explanation of the problem of innocent suffering: how can a just God allow it? It is no valid reply, insists Shaw, to jeer at him because he can't catch a crocodile! That's not an answer—it's just a supercilious sneer.

It is easy to sympathise with Shaw's dissatisfaction. Yet, ironically, I suspect Shaw's reaction to these final chapters goes a long way towards explaining why he was an unbeliever and could never have been happy in heaven.

You see, like Job, Shaw had grown up in an intellectual climate that was influenced too much by rationalism. He too wanted the universe to be fully explicable by man. Any recourse to mystery was an anti-intellectual, anti-scientific cop-out.

And as long as we, like Shaw, insist that God owes us a rational explanation of the way he runs his universe before we are prepared to do him the honour of believing in him, faith will always elude us. For a God who can fully explain himself to man is, as Luther said, "too human a God". And a "human God" is ultimately an unnecessary God. What need do we have for a God we can fully understand? We can be our own God if we're that clever!

Of course God of the Bible addresses himself to our reason. Indeed he gives us some intellectual insight into the mysteries of his mind. He inspired the prophets to precisely that

end. And because of that revelation of the divine mind, we may dare to say we understand something about God. We may even call ourselves "theologians"—people who study the science of the knowledge of God. But if we think that means God has given or owes us a total explanation of everything that happens, then we are not just wrong, we are sinfully proud: our arrogant rationalistic hubris has led us in being, like Job, people who think we can put God in the dock—when the truth is, that's where we belong, always and every time.

For we are creatures: he is our Creator. That fundamental asymmetry places an inescapable limit on our theological competence. We must expect that at points our theories are going to break down, and we will be left with the choice between unbelief or recourse to mystery. If it were not so, God would not be God.

At that point it is not our intelligence that is tested—but our humility.

Job needed to be brought to a humbler view of himself and of the limitations of his own understanding and importance. In that connection, see how he speaks in the final chapter (42:1-6). If there is a revealed purpose behind his suffering in this book, perhaps this is where it must be sought: in those words, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes".

Have you ever said such words?

Have you ever, with Job, felt the unspeakably wonderful majesty of God—a majesty that at once hurls us into a humiliating sense of our own insignificance and yet simultaneously summons us, by some mysterious inner rapture, into personal communion?

Job admits that he had known about God theoretically ("my ears had heard of you"); but theory hadn't been enough—not in the hour of suffering and bereavement.

You will find the same. Born in a Christian culture maybe, educated in a Christian school, baptised in a Christian church, trained in an evangelical Bible college—but all the religious background and theological knowledge in the world will mean nothing to you, if ever God propels you into circumstances that contradict the traditional theories you have been taught by the Christian community. In fact, our religious background becomes an obstacle in those circumstances. For, in our pride, it makes us think we have a right to answers—our theology should be able to cope! No—it can never cope with the deep mystery of suffering:

"I spoke of things I did not understand—too wonderful for me to know."

There are a million things we do not understand—the more answers our science discovers the more new questions it poses. And among those unfathomable questions, hidden in the abyss of God's eternal counsels, is the ultimate answer to the problem of innocent suffering.

(I suggest to you that hidden in those counsels lies the divine purpose in homosexual orientation too.)

But right now, such answers are not available to us. Those Christians who insist they know the answers are wrong. And they make bad counsellors because, like Job's three friends, they end up falsely accusing the innocent in order to make their false theories stick.

We do not need to be intimidated by them. For our anomalous experience is actually a privilege; rightly responded to, it can take us to a whole new dimension of spiritual insight.

When pain torments our body; when unwelcome fantasies invade our sleep; when friends unite to condemn us; when death hovers on our doorstep—then, it is not a textbook of theology that we need to read; it is not even this sermon we need to listen to!

Only a personal encounter with the living God will do in such a situation: an encounter that goes beyond second-hand intellectual theorising to first-hand heart experience:

"My ears had heard but now my eyes have seen you."

Some of you may be familiar with the strange and evocative poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins, the Victorian Jesuit. His majestic poem, *Wreck of the Deutschland*, was written in the wake of a storm at sea that took many lives including a party of nuns. The news of their death clearly horrified Hopkins. In his poem he projects himself imaginatively into the position of someone on the deck of the stricken ship as they face the prospect of the imminent drowning. And through the darkness of that terrifying anticipation, he perceives, like Job, not a whirlwind of meaningless chaos but the face of infinite majesty:

Thou mastering me God,

Give of breath and bread

World strand, sway of the sea

Lord of living and dead

Thou has bound bones and veins in me

Fastened me flesh

And after it almost unmade what with dread thy doing.

And dost thou touch me afresh?

Over again I feel thy finger

And find thee.

In these powerful lines Hopkins confesses that, at the end of the day, like Job, he has no answers. Instead he has discovered the impertinence of thinking he has a right to answers. Like Luther, he has humbly realised the folly of believing in a "too human God".

Of course humanistic reason will never accept this. It is too Promethean in its arrogance to despise itself and repent in dust and ashes. That's why it is idolatry. That's why God must judge it.

But believe me—no, believe Job—that is the only place where the suffering soul can find peace—the only place where creatures of the dust like us can expect to find God—in the place of humility.

Maybe you will find that experience in your own private storm as Job did. Or maybe you will find it, as some of us have done, at the foot of the cross. Our New Testament Christian faith you see has a different focus from Job's Old Testament faith—a focus I think Job longed to discover, and maybe, just occasionally glimpsed with prophetic insight. Our faith focuses around suffering. We revere a man who hangs in torment on a cross—a righteous man, whose innocence was more justly outraged by the undeserved nature of his suffering than Job could ever be. A man who suffered dreadfully—even more dreadfully than Job—to the point of death. And who cried in that final extremity, as Job did "Why God? Why hast thou forsaken me".

Strange that we should call that the focus of our faith—for surely we have argued that such a vision should above all things contradict faith?

But no—here is the final paradox, where the heart discovers reasons that reason cannot plumb.

At the foot of the cross:

—we find the human face of God that Job so much longed to see

—we discover the hope beyond the grave that Job so much desired to possess

That's where, more scandalous and yet more comforting than all other divine mysteries, we find a God who suffers with us—no, more even than that, a God who suffers for us.

We pretend it is explanations we seek, but it isn't really—not when the chips are really down. It's the assurance that God is ours—that we belong to him and he to us—that we really long to have. For given that we can endure anything.

That's the miracle we want—and at the foot of the cross it's the miracle we get.

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