

# CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 24

Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

## Welcome

Welcome to the midweek Cutting Edge Camelot. Anna continues her series on ‘Why does God allow this pandemic?’ by looking at the book of Job and the problem of bad things happening to good people.

Anna is grateful for the feedback received by her article on the problem of evil a fortnight ago. Please do get in touch with her if you have any thoughts or further questions which you wish to raise on this week’s topic. Her email is [curate@camelotparishes.org.uk](mailto:curate@camelotparishes.org.uk)

## Scripture Passage

*Job 1-2*

**1** There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. **2** There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. **3** He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east...

**6** One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. **7** The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the Lord, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” **8** The Lord said to Satan, “Have you

considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” <sup>9</sup> Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? <sup>10</sup> Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. <sup>11</sup> But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” <sup>12</sup> The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!” So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

<sup>13</sup> One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother’s house, <sup>14</sup> a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, <sup>15</sup> and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” <sup>16</sup> While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you.” <sup>17</sup> While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” <sup>18</sup> While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house, <sup>19</sup> and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you.”

<sup>20</sup> Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. <sup>21</sup> He said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

<sup>22</sup> In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

**2** One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. **2** The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the Lord, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” **3** The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” **4** Then Satan answered the Lord, “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. **5** But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” **6** The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

**7** So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. **8** Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

**9** Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” **10** But he said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

**11** Now when Job’s three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home – Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. **12** When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. **13** They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

## Reflection

*‘When bad things happen to good people’*

For many people, the question, ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’, is very difficult to answer. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, out of his experience of his son Aaron being diagnosed with progeria and dying just days after his fourteenth birthday. Rabbi Kushner begins the book by sharing how he felt when he was told that his son had a terminal condition.

*How does one handle news like that? I was a young, inexperienced rabbi, not as familiar with the process of grief as I would later come to be, and what I mostly felt that day was a deep, aching sense of unfairness. It didn’t make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families.*

*(Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Page xx).*

Rabbi Kushner puts into words what so many people have thought and felt when they have seen bad things happen to good people, or even experienced bad things themselves, and have been left asking, ‘Why?’

The archetypal biblical example of bad things happening to a good person is Job. Job is described by God as ‘a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil’. I think The Message paraphrase of the Bible puts it rather well: ‘Have you noticed my friend Job? There’s no one quite like him – honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil.’ Clearly, Job is a good person. But then bad things – terrible things – start to happen.

First, Job is told that his oxen and donkeys have been stolen by a group of Sabeans (a tribe from South Arabia), who also killed the servants who were looking after the oxen and donkeys. Next Job is told that fire has burned up

his sheep and the servants who were looking after them. Then Job is told that a group of Chaldeans (a tribe from what became Babylon) came and stole his camels and killed the servants who were looking after them. Finally, he is told that a building has collapsed killing all of his children.

Job's response? 'Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'" How many of us, in Job's position, would have responded by worshipping God?

And even when things get worse, when Job is completely covered in sores, and his wife suggests he responds by cursing God, Job still trusts in him: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" he asks.

Then 'Job's comforters' arrive. They weep, tear their clothes and cover themselves in ash, and then they sit with Job, in silence, for a week. Later they begin to offer him explanations and advice – all of which is rejected by Job.

Finally, Job hears from God, and he begins to recognise the limits of his own understanding: 'Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know' (42.3). The book of Job ends with Job's fortunes being restored and closes with the words, 'And Job died, old and full of days' (42.17).

However, Job never finds out why such terrible things happened to him, any more than Harold Kushner finds out why his teenage son had to die – so his book is called **When** *Bad Things Happen...*, not **Why** *Bad Things Happen...*

Nevertheless, the story of Job might help us in thinking through the apparent unfairness of suffering.

First, it is a reminder that suffering is a universal experience, and that while we might sometimes find ourselves thinking that some people are more or less deserving of the suffering they experience, this does not change the fact that most people will experience some form of suffering in their lifetime. What is significant is how we respond to the suffering. Job doesn't just accept his suffering quietly, but asks 'Why?' and questions God. He turns to God, rather than rejecting God. The Psalms are full of examples of people crying out to God in the midst of their suffering; Psalm 102 begins,

Hear my prayer, O Lord;  
let my cry come to you.

Do not hide your face from me  
in the day of my distress.

Incline your ear to me;  
answer me speedily in the day when I call.

Like Job and the psalmist, we can bring our pain and suffering to God. God is with us and hears us, especially in the midst of our pain and suffering.

Secondly, we want to avoid being like Job's friends. They start out on the right track: they sit with Job, they weep with Job, they remain quietly with him. But then they feel the need to offer answers and advice, and this is when they become less helpful. As Francis Anderson notes in his commentary, their advice sounds 'trite, stale or sanctimonious', when what Job really needs is compassion. It can be so hard not to offer advice or platitudes or to try to 'make it better', but often the most helpful thing is simply to be alongside someone and gently listen.

There is so much more that could be said about the book of Job, and it may be when you were reading the passage that something in particular struck you. I'm not convinced the purpose of Job is to solve the problem of why bad things happen to good people, but perhaps it helps us to see where God is and how we might respond when we encounter suffering in our own or others' lives.

You might like to respond by...

1. Reading Job 3.1-16 and 42.1-6, which are the words spoken by Job at the very start of his ordeal and then when he has finally heard from God. How are they different? What do you learn about God from them? What do you learn about yourself?
2. You might like to get hold of Harold Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.
3. The Psalms offer many examples of people crying out to God. Maybe you'd like to write a psalm, or a letter, to God expressing how you are feeling at this time?
4. Has reading this led you to have any further thoughts or questions? You might like to share these with someone, and with God.

*Thank you to those who got in touch after my reflection on 'the problem of evil'. I really valued hearing your thoughts and reflections, and would be delighted to receive more responses.*

Anna

### **Points for Prayers**

- Joining in the season of prayer between Ascension and Pentecost (see further details below)
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes
- Those suffering from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and at home
- Need for further largescale testing
- Prayers for parents, teachers, governors and children in implementing the process of partial reopening of schools

- Funerals needing to take place under new restrictions with only family mourners
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

### **Why not try?**

- Going to [www.thykingdomcome.global](http://www.thykingdomcome.global) and looking at some of the resources there. Are there any that you might use to help your prayer life in this period between Ascension and Pentecost? Are there any other ways in which God might be prompting you to mark out this time as a special season of prayer?

### **Diocesan weekly livestreamed services and reflections**

Bishop Peter and Bishop Ruth will be livestreaming a mid-week Eucharist each week and offering recorded reflections each Sunday.

For further details please see the Diocesan website.

### **Church of England Daily Hopeline**

The Archbishop of Canterbury has launched a new telephone service, 'Daily Hopeline'. If you ring the free number 0800 804 8044 you can hear a recorded message and can also listen to well-known hymns along with prayers and a reflection based on a hymn.

*Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family*

*We pray that 'we might live in love,  
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2)*