

14/7/19

“The limits of believing”

Hebrew Bible Job 38 1-11, 16-18 and 31-38. New International Version

The LORD Answers Job

38 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

³ Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

⁷ when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

⁸ “Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?—

⁹ when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it,

and set bars and doors,

¹¹ and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

¹⁶ “Have you entered into the springs of the sea,

or walked in the recesses of the deep?

¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you,

or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?

¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?

Declare, if you know all this.

³¹ “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,

or loose the cords of Orion?

³² Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,

or can you guide the Bear with its children?

³³ Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?

Can you establish their rule on the earth?

³⁴ “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,

so that a flood of waters may cover you?

³⁵ Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go

and say to you, ‘Here we are’?

³⁶ Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,

or given understanding to the mind?

³⁷ Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?

Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,

³⁸ when the dust runs into a mass

and the clods cling together?

Contemporary reading “Who is God? The soul’s journey home” by Irma Zaleski

“The goal of religion is to call us out of our small, frightened self, to make us aware of our finiteness and the poverty of our ordinary thinking mind. Religion does not do away with our ordinary mind- or any aspect of our ordinary human reality. Rather, it stretches it, transforms it and opens it to the Divine Reality. It does not present us with a solution to the Mystery, but summons us to approach it....trembling in awe”.

REFLECTION

An article published last year in a Scottish newspaper gives this enthusiastic report.

“Newbattle High School has been embarking upon Virtual Reality (VR) lessons in conjunction with Google Expeditions with outstanding results. Staff and students have been amazed by the impact on learning and the ability to go anywhere your heart desires with VR. This term, our Science department have been looking at the solar system and have set off on several trips to outer space. Shouts of “wow” and “oh my goodness” and “this is amazing” could be heard from the classrooms... Imagine swimming amongst coral reefs or staring into the eye of a miniature Category 5 hurricane. VR provides outstanding visualisations that aren’t possible in the traditional classroom that inspire and create interest ..” (Midlothian

Advertiser Oct 25th 2018).

Or perhaps if you are a less computer savvy people like me, you can recall the experience of visiting an aquarium and standing in a reinforced glass tunnel , your mouth hanging open, as you gazed with awe at the vibrant sea life moving over and around you. Maybe you too felt a shiver of fear as a dark shadow passed overhead and a large stingray glided past or a shark eyed you hungrily.

These examples give us a small insight into the mix of feelings Job might have felt as God led him imaginatively round some of the most amazing and mysterious places in creation. So how did Job end up on this whistle stop tour of the wonders of the universe?

Let me remind you of the story....

The prose folk tale which begins and ends the Book of Job is set a long time ago in the land of Uz. God agrees in a heavenly council, that the “blameless and upright “ (1:1) Job can be tested to determine his faithfulness to God. Job loses not only his flocks, but his sons and daughters too. Despite this he continues to trust God. Then he is laid low with a horrible skin disease. At this his wife urges him to “ curse God and die!”. (2:9)

But still Job remains loyal. His three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar arrive and shocked by the state of Job and his misfortune, sit silently in solidarity with him for seven days and nights, in “the midst of the ashes” of his life. (2:8)

Then Job “opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth”. (3:1)

There follow 35 chapters of passionate, poetic dialogue as Job and his so called “comforters” respond to his devastating situation in their different ways. Later a younger friend, Elihu, adds his tuppensworth, but by Chapter 38 and the beginning of our reading, pretty much all that could be humanly said on the topic has been said.

At this point God encounters Job directly and that is the beginning of something new.

I’d like to take a small detour here for a moment and ponder what sort “God” Job and his friends have.

For Job’s friends the picture of their relationship with God is clear, simple and ordered. They see God as the central, controlling power of the universe, the all powerful deity who rewards “righteousness” and punishes “evil”.

Zophar says to Job

“If you direct your heart rightly,
you will stretch out your hands towards God,
Surely then you will lift up your face
without blemish:
You will be secure and will not fear.
But the eyes of the wicked will fail:
all way of escape will be lost to them,
and their hope is to breathe their last.” (11:13,15 and 20)

It’s a simplistic viewpoint, but the received wisdom of the time. Not the most helpful thing to say to someone as bereft and overwhelmed as Job. Perhaps Job has believed this in the past himself. If so that whole way of thinking has crumbled irretrievably.

The picture of Job’s relationship with his (definitely male) God is different- dark and chaotic, with the occasional glimmer of beauty, and deep energy. He yearns to communicate face to face with God (Chapter 23:3-5)

³Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
⁴I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
⁵I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.

And he also voices his doubt and fear.

“With violence (God) seizes my garment,
(And) grasps me by the collar of my tunic,
(God) has cast me into the mire,
and I have become like dust and ashes” (30:16-18) adapted.

Then, in the climax of the book, and the passage we heard read today, a little more of Job’s relationship with God is revealed. God appears to Job in a whirlwind. The strength and

fierceness of that encounter matches the intensity of Job's current experience. But rather than God directly answering Job's questions, God challenges Job!

In chapter 38 Job is summonsed by God and challenged. 38:2-3

“Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?

³Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.

Have a look at the picture on the front of the order of service for a minute, it has a lot to tell us about this moment and how things stand between Job and his God. This is one of forty three illuminations of the story of Job, in an 9th century manuscript preserved in the St John monastery on Patmos.

Can you see how Job is standing? He's facing into the storm, you can see how his knees are facing forward, while his clothes are blowing all over the place and he's had to turn his face away from the blast. Yet still his stance is directed towards the source of this wild energy. If you look more closely, you can also see that Job is tying up the cords of his belt, “girding up his loins”, getting ready to do battle, as God has instructed him. Those of us who are feminists, might like to think of Zena the warrior princess, getting ready to leap into action!

For me the most intriguing bit of the illumination, is the fact that you can't actually see the expression on Job's face. The manuscript has been damaged so it is impossible to tell – is Job terrified, is he determined, is he ecstatic or is he overwhelmed???

(Balentyne, 2006 p644)

We'll never really know. Job, who has previously expressed the depth of his feelings so articulately, initially declines to answer.

I have to admit to a feeling of sympathy for the poor man . On the surface it appears that in his time of despair God responds with a rough interrogation. It doesn't seem like a very compassionate response.

But when I listened to Chapter 38 in a recorded version, spoken in the sonorous tones of English actor David Suchet, I heard a hint of something different. Yes, there is a feeling of confrontation, but as the chapter continues, David Suchet's tone changes and softens. the questioning becomes gentler, almost coaxing, as if God was trying to draw Job in.

Could God's repeated questioning be a way of disassembling the remains of Job's already disintegrating mental framework? A way of opening up and changing his way of thinking as he realises with awe, the creativity and variety of the universal system of which he is a tiny part?

A few years ago I went on a week long silent retreat to St Francis' Friary in Auckland. I was feeling tired and quite exhausted by the demands of working life and was longing for some peace and quiet to rest and recover. It didn't turn out quite that way!

At the beginning of the week we read Joy Cowleys' Arohanui Blessing and a line in the second verse struck me.... "May the wonder of God renew you". I was puzzled by that- WONDER renew you, NOT rest and relaxation???

That's how it proved to be. My week, although physically restful, turned out to be hard emotional and spiritual work. But I felt connected with God in a new way, and that time really did become an experience of wonder. By the end of it, I had laid aside some tired old ways of thinking, and opened up to the possibility of a new way of being. I returned to my "regular" life renewed and re-energised.

Getting back to the windblown Job.....

In the last chapter of the book as the intensity of Job's protest and enormity of God's response reverberate together in our beings, he at last finds some words to speak.

He says...

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know....
My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes. Job 42:3,5 -6

The Hebrew at this point is apparently difficult to understand, but a note in the NRSV of the Bible suggests the meaning of this last sentence is closer to "**I yield and allow myself to be comforted**". (NRSV 4th Edition 2010 p770)

I listened to a podcast in the wake of the Christchurch Mosque shootings which makes another suggestion. Pondering the similarly shocking 9/11 terrorist attacks, Rabbi and teacher Barry Cytron has this to say..

"The word in Hebrew that we normally translate as "repent" is better translated..... not "I repent that I am dust and ashes," but "**I am reconciled that I am dust and ashes.**" Namely, I now realize how vulnerable life is, and I accept that fate as a human being." (Barry Cytron Sept 22, 2001 in Krista Tippett On being podcast)

Whatever interpretation of these words you find rings true for you, it is clear that Job has reached a turning point. He has been, to quote the hymn we sang earlier, drawn "past the limits of believing". Having so dramatically lost his sense of stability and coherence, Job's honesty and vulnerability allow an experience of wonder that "stretches", "transforms", and "opens" his whole being. (Zaleski I 2006, p).

Now that Job's inner world has found its centre, his outer world also falls into place.

In the happy ending of this tale, God affirms Job as one who "spoke the truth about me" (42:8). He is given family and fortune, "twice as much as he had before" (42:10) and dies "an old man and full of years" (42:17).

Though we don't hear of it in the Book of Job, I can imagine him watching, astonished the energy of his seven strapping sons as they tend his flocks or pondering with delight the wisdom and beauty of his three daughters. And perhaps he could be seen sitting sometimes as the sun set over the nearby hills, mulling wonderingly over the memory of that fierce encounter with God

Summoning God,

who calls us through longing and fear,

and meets us in the dusty depths of our lives,

expand and enliven us,

that we may search with courage,

live with wonder and

overflow with joy.

Because we need your generous, questioning love,

Amen.

References:

Atkinson, David John (1991) "The message of Job" Intervarsity Press, Illinois, USA

Balentine, Samuel Eugene (2006) "Job" Smyth and Helwys Pub, Macon, USA

Breuggeman, Walter (2003) "An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination" Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Cytron, Barry (2001- September 2nd) interview with Krista Tippet " On being. Where was God" <https://onbeing.org/programs/where-was-god/>

Midlothian Advertiser October 25th 2018 <https://www.midlothianadvertiser.co.uk/> Midlothian, Edinburgh Scotland.

Spong John (2011) "Reclaiming the Bible for a non-religious world" Harper Collins, New York. USA

Zaleski Irma (2006) "Who is God: the Soul's road home" New Seeds, Boston, Massachusetts, USA