

**20 June 2021**

**The Third Sunday after Trinity**

It may be Father's Day but if you dads at home are contemplating sitting back and relaxing, cracking open a few early beers and enjoying the sermon, you've got another think coming! So this sermon comes with a government health warning as it contains some uncomfortable and distressing truths but also, I believe, a message of love and hope.

The book of Job has to be one of the most puzzling books of the Bible. It contains an explanation for why God allows evil and suffering in the world that many people find entirely unsatisfactory. And yet I believe that it is one that deserves some merit. There is no perfect explanation for this age-old philosophical problem, but partial explanations go some way to completing the picture and this is one section of the jigsaw puzzle.

In chapter 1 Satan tells God that Job is only faithful to him because his life is full of good things. He asks God's permission to destroy everything that Job has because he claims that then Job will curse God. God allows this to happen, an episode that is as problematic as Him asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but Job does not curse God. At the end of Chapter 1, Job says, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." And we are told that "in all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."

"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised".

So why is it that at times the wicked appear to prosper and the good people suffer? Job himself asks this question in chapter 21, “why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?”

I first visited the site of the notorious death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau just under 20 years ago as part of a group of teachers on a day’s visit organised by the Holocaust Educational Trust.

The visit was an experience that I thought I was proving to be quite resilient to until near the end of the March day when we were standing close to the perimeter fence behind the gas chambers and crematoria. The sun sank in the sky, and it grew very cold. In the field beyond the fence a farmer was burning leaves. The flames and smoke so close to the ruins of the crematoria sickened me and I was shocked by his insensitivity in engaging in an activity which it transpired was illegal. With the ground beneath us still white from the ashes of the victims of the crematoria the true horror of the place sank in, and my only reaction was to want to get out of there as soon as possible.

The rabbi who accompanied us conducted a service of memorial standing in the ruins of crematorium 3. We all lit candles and placed them in the ruins, but the wind blew them out almost immediately, as quickly as the lives of tens of thousands of people were extinguished soon after arrival at Birkenau. The rabbi told us that if the 150 people in our party each observed a minute’s silence to remember just one of the people murdered, we would have to stand in silence for two whole years to remember all those who died in that place. We left the camp in silence walking the length of the railway remembering the suffering of the

slave labour used to build it and the wasted lives of the hundreds of thousands who died there.

There is a story, once thought to have been apocryphal but confirmed as true in 2008 at a Holocaust Educational Trust appeal dinner by the Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel who startled his audience by declaring that he was there in Birkenau when three men put God on trial. The BBC staged the philosophical debate in the film, 'God on Trial'. The defence moves through some familiar arguments: suffering is part of God's plan; we must take the rough with the smooth; bad things have happened before; evil is a test of faith or a punishment for wrongdoing; the Holocaust is a purification which will produce a Holy Remnant; evil is a result of human free will and so on. The charge was that in the Holocaust God was breaking His covenant with Israel and Wiesel says that they found Him 'chayav' rather than guilty, meaning 'He owes us something'.

In the film, the prosecution declares that God is not good, He is simply strong, and He chooses to change sides. But the argument is put forward for the defence that we cannot know the mind of God and they begin to recite from the book of Job, from chapter 38 from which our reading is taken this morning. Let me remind you:

God says, "who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?", and to Job, "where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?" And in four chapters of the most beautiful Hebrew poetry, God makes Job feel totally inadequate until Job admits in chapter 40, "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you?", and in chapter 42, "surely I spoke of things I

did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know?”, and he declares to God, “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”

God is ineffable, a being far beyond human understanding and the ability of human language to describe. A God who in the person of Jesus Christ commanded the winds and the waves to obey him and struck terror into the hearts of the disciples with him in the boat. But a God who is not only strong but is also goodness and love. We trust that He has a plan for our lives, for our world, that He knows what He is doing, regardless of whether our mortal minds can comprehend it. For many, this is an inadequate justification for the existence of suffering and evil. How can such an idea justify the scale of suffering that we witnessed in the Holocaust, the deaths of hundreds of thousands because of a virus, or when we are burdened with more suffering than we can bear? Surely an all-loving God would not permit His creation to suffer on such a vast scale? Almost certainly, the Holocaust was the consequence of extreme abuses of human free will rather than an episode that was willed by an all-powerful and all-loving God. Such events are a risk that comes with giving us the freedom of choice that we desire so greatly, and in saying that I do not intend to trivialise perhaps the greatest moral stain in the history of humankind.

What I know is this, and this is where the key Christian response overrides philosophical argument, that we believe in a God who in the person of Jesus Christ underwent the cruellest of sufferings on the cross so that we might live, that as Peter said last week, had to die to be fulfilled. A God who not only died for us but taught that human beings have no greater love than to lay down their lives for a friend. In fulfilling the Old Testament, the

Gospel of Jesus Christ reveals God's character of saving love and calls us to offer ourselves in sacrificial love.

And so we return to Auschwitz where at the end of July 1941, one prisoner escaped from the camp, prompting [SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritzsche](#), the deputy camp commander, to pick ten men to be starved to death in an underground bunker to deter further escape attempts. When one of the selected men, [Franciszek Gajowniczek](#), cried out, "My wife! My children!", a Roman Catholic priest and political prisoner, Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to take his place.

According to an eyewitness, who was an assistant janitor at that time, in his prison cell Kolbe led the prisoners in prayer. Each time the guards checked on him, he was standing or kneeling in the middle of the cell and looking calmly at those who entered. After they had been starved and deprived of water for two weeks, only Kolbe remained alive.

The guards wanted the bunker emptied, so they gave Kolbe a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Kolbe is said to have raised his left arm and calmly waited for the deadly injection. He died on 14 August. Kolbe was canonized a saint by Pope John Paul II on 10 October 1982. [Gajowniczek](#) was present at both his beatification and canonization ceremonies.

In 1994, [Gajowniczek](#) visited the St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church in Houston, Texas, where he told his translator that "so long as he ... has breath in his lungs, he would consider it his duty to tell people about the heroic act of love by Maximilian Kolbe." [Gajowniczek](#) died on 13 March 1995 at the age of 93.

We are not all called to make such dramatic sacrifices and should not feel inadequate as Christians if our daily sacrifices are more humble, but as long as we have breath in our lungs,

it is our duty to tell people about the saving act of love in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and glory now and for evermore. Amen.