

SERVICE FOR OCTOBER 17TH 2021

Preacher Mrs Barbara Searle

There are links on the hymns to versions online with the lyrics

Call to Worship

Worship Songs: [All Heaven Declares the Glory of the Risen Lord](#)
[From Heaven You Came Helpless Babe](#)

Prayers and The Lord's Prayer

Reading: Mark 10: 35-45

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask.'

³⁶ 'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked.

³⁷ They replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.'

³⁸ 'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?'

³⁹ 'We can,' they answered.

Jesus said to them, 'You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.'

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Talk to Church Family: How Did He do That?

Hymn R&S 117: [How Great Thou Art](#)

(Young people leave)

Reading: Job 38: 1 – 7 & 34 – 41

38 And now, finally, GOD answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said:

"Why do you confuse the issue?

Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about?

Pull yourself together, Job!

Up on your feet! Stand tall!

I have some questions for you,

and I want some straight answers.

Where were you when I created the earth?

Tell me, since you know so much!

Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!

Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?

How was its foundation poured,

and who set the cornerstone,

While the morning stars sang in chorus
and all the angels shouted praise?

34-35 “Can you get the attention of the clouds,
and commission a shower of rain?

Can you take charge of the lightning bolts
and have them report to you for orders?

36-38 “Who do you think gave weather-wisdom to the ibis,
and storm-savvy to the rooster?

Does anyone know enough to number all the clouds
or tip over the rain barrels of heaven

When the earth is cracked and dry,
the ground baked hard as a brick?

39-41 “Can you teach the lioness to stalk her prey
and satisfy the appetite of her cubs

As they crouch in their den,
waiting hungrily in their cave?

And who sets out food for the ravens
when their young cry to God,
fluttering about because they have no food?”

Meditational Reading: Landscapes of Glory by Thomas Traherne

Hymn: R&S 60 [God Who Spoke In The Beginning](#)

SERMON: THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Have you been to see Dippy at the Cathedral? Or “Gaia”, currently on display at St Peter Mancroft? Did you, just for a moment, and ignoring the eye-watering cost wish you could boldly go with William Shatner, to the edge of space? Were you amazed at the recent photos of the surface of Mercury? And finally, as we go into the second half of October, are you enjoying the annual display of colour which is Autumn? Even if you cannot answer yes to some of those questions I hope your imagination was sparked by our reading from the Book of Job (and perhaps by the words of Thomas Traherne too).

The Book of Job is one of the books in the Bible which are known as “Wisdom Literature”. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the most well known examples in the O.T. and the Letter of James, from which we heard a few Sundays ago, is the only one in the N.T. It is easy to see why these books might be regarded as “Wisdom” because, to put them in a nutshell, they contain advice for all aspects of daily living. Advice which is very clear; respect God, live by his laws and values and thus live in harmony with him, his world and those around you.

The Book of Job however, takes this advice a stage further, because Job *does* live according to God’s values. We are told “this man was blameless and upright, he feared God and shunned evil” and the description goes on to say that “Job was prosperous..... He was the greatest man among all the people living in the East”. But, as a result of a discussion in the Court of Heaven, God allows Satan to put Job

to the test. At a stroke, a series of disasters destroys his family, his servants and his animals and Job is struck down with a disease which leaves him covered in painful sores. He is so broken that he takes himself away and sits on a heap of ashes. It is here that his 3 friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zopher find him and try to help him. This is where the phrase “Job’s comforters” comes from.

They discuss the possible reasons behind Job’s suffering, mainly that he must have done something to offend God (they are of course unaware of the real reason) but this does not help Job because he knows that he is blameless. He decides that the only thing he can do is to find God and speak to him as if he is in a law court, laying out his case. Despite everything that has happened, Job still believes that God is just and therefore will listen. But God proves elusive, Job cannot find him and sinks further into despair.

And then comes the passage from which we heard this morning, as God breaks his silence in a wonderful poem praising his work of Creation. It sweeps us along by its descriptions of the natural world and it really is worth reading the whole thing if you can.

But I think this passage also does something else. It confronts us with a perspective on God which we do not always want to think about – that God is in fact a mystery, a being beyond our wildest imaginations who acts inscrutably and unexpectedly. However hard we try, our human minds cannot truly define God in any conventional way. He is beyond our human understanding.

We do not know who wrote the Book of Job. One theory is that the basic story was a folk tale which was used as a starting point for an exploration of God and our relationship with him. Certainly the book, and especially this passage, has things to say about God which I think are important and should not be forgotten.

And the first thing is that out of what Job thinks is silence, God does speak. There are of course other people in the Bible to whom God speaks – Moses and the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah for example. And it is typical that God is heard from a whirlwind because it is in nature that we, too, often find God. But it is obvious too that God’s words are not what Job expected or probably hoped for! Job is presented with a series of questions which demonstrate how small and insignificant Job is in comparison with the ultimate power that is God. If you go to see “Gaia” you may share Job’s experience. As you look at the world, mapped from space and gently turning on its axis, you get a real sense of perspective. First you have to look very hard to see Britain, and then you realise how tiny you are, just a microdot like a grain of sand on the earth’s surface!

As we listen to the big questions presented to Job we very quickly realise that God is not only the questioner but also the answer which leads us to my next thought; it is God who has the final word. Job’s suffering is highly personal but it is also part of a vast scheme of things too difficult for the human mind understand. Even though human wisdom is a gift from God it will always have limitations because we are “only human”. God’s questions to Job emphasise the huge distance between God

and humanity and they remind us of God's cosmic sovereignty. It is God who made the world, loved it and filled it with good things, not us.

At the end of the day, the world is God's not Job's and human beings need to be humble in the face of God's supreme power. Sometimes we need to use the words of the writer of Psalm 8 when he says "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" This was also a thread in our reading from Mark's gospel. James and John are from the inner circle of the disciples and although they recognise the wonder and power of Jesus they see it in very human terms and try to use it to their own advantage. They are guilty of human vanity and ambition which has no place in the God's kingdom.

But first and foremost I think the message we need to take away with us this morning is that even in the face of this all-powerful God, Job has not been abandoned. Job has been desperately searching for God but in fact God has been there all along. It reminds us of a well known story about a man who dreamt he was walking along a beach with Jesus. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life and for each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand – one set was the man's and the other set belonged to Jesus.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him he looked back at the footprints and noticed that sometimes there was only one set and he realised that this was at the times when he was sad or low.

He decided to ask Jesus about it "Lord, you said that if I followed you, you would walk beside me all the way so why are there sometimes only one set of footprints? Where were you when I was most troubled?"

Jesus replied "My son, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial or suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it is because I was carrying you."

I suspect that many of us here this morning have been where Job was; there may be someone who feels like that today or someone who is trying to offer support in that situation. I know from my own experience how far away God can seem and how easy it is, like Job, to feel angry with him. But at the heart of the story of Job lies a simple truth; suffering is not about losing God, but rather brings us face to face with him. So the question which the story of Job raises is not "why am I suffering?" but "how may I find peace with God in the midst of suffering?"

Mother Julian, the 14th century anchorite who lived in Norwich suffered a serious illness when she was about 30. She almost died, but had a series of visions or "showings" in which she experienced Jesus' suffering on the cross, and which she wrote down in "The Revelations of Divine Love". She says "For God wills that we believe we can see him, all the time, continually, even though it seems to us we see him very little....for his will is to be seen and to be sought, his will is to be waited for and trusted."

As Job discovers, suffering is part of being human and his situation is just a small part of a much greater scheme of things.

We live in an age when we think that we can find the answer to everything. Last Tuesday was Science Day and in a short article in the Radio Times Sir Paul Nurse wrote “Science is playing an increasingly important role in everything we do; it also produces knowledge that enhances our culture and civilization.”

We cannot disagree with that. We all know, and are grateful for, what hard working scientists have learned about Covid 19 in a remarkably short time. But I also believe that there are some things which are unfathomable and chief among them would be God himself. The prophet Isaiah wrote: “God does not grow faint or weary: his understanding is unfathomable.”

There is a temptation for us to make God too small, too predictable, and too cosy. We cannot simply imagine him as someone looking down on us from a cloud!

But if we cannot understand God, where do this morning’s readings leave us?

My answer is to go back to the beginning of my thoughts; to Dippy the dinosaur, “Gaia”, the wonders of space and our ability to explore it (Galileo would have loved it!) and the annual display of colour which is Autumn. In other words, marvel at all the wonders which surround us – and aren’t we fortunate to live in such a beautiful part of the world?

Somehow, even in the midst of terrible things, we need to enjoy the world that we have been given by God. I cannot put it better than Thomas Traherne: Can you take too much joy in your Father’s works? He is himself in everything.”

AMEN

Hymn: R&S 86 [God Who Stretched The Spangled Heavens](#)

Prayers of Concern

Hymn: [Look Forward in Faith](#)

Closing Words

The Blessing