

Questions

Job 23:1-9,16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16

We live in an age where people expect answers to every question. We live in an age when people, politicians, government officials, chief executives of companies, even church leaders have become adept at avoiding given answers to questions. I remember a few years back meeting with a very senior politician who, whenever I asked a question about homelessness, talked about climate change; whenever I asked about climate change, talked about the economic situation. We've heard it dozens of times in television and radio interviews. Or worse: when some hapless journalist lands a few pointed questions on a politician, hears the response, "Well, the question that you should be asking is this..." which was not the question that was being asked at all.

I remember a few years ago being with the Chief Rabbi, who for every question I asked, asked of me another, in that traditional Jewish way.

In official Church circles when we are engaged with business matters, there is a dictum used that runs, "Questions are always in order", even if answers are not necessarily always forthcoming.

We like to have answers to our questions, because questions yawn like chasms of uncertainty before us, and speak of darkness, and insecurity, and inadequacy.

We heard last week that the Book of Job, one of the great literary masterpieces of the Bible, is a parable, a story composed by the wisdom writers of ancient Israel, who were trying to answer some of the big questions that humanity faced then, and still faces now? Why is there suffering and pain in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? What is the meaning of life? Today many people would simply go to their computers and do a Google search. For your edification, I typed in, "meaning of life", and here is the answer:

"...the condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter, including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death."

So now you know!

But we all know that questions about the meaning of life, and the purpose of existence, is so much more than bare scientific data. Where science, and the arts, and theology meet, there we begin to

think about meaning and purpose. And when we think like that, questions inevitably come. As they should.

There will not be a person in this Church today who has not stood on some lonely shore looking out into the space of eternity and wondered why this, why that, why me, why now? And suffusing all of our questioning, when times have become unexpectedly tough, or where the pressure of problems becomes increasingly hard to bear, the supreme question, "Where is God?" Even the person with the sunniest disposition; even the person who impels themself to look on the bright side, will know something of the nagging doubt, the insidious insecurity, the frank disbelief. And that is natural, for that is to be human. If we are afraid to question, we are afraid to live in the real world. If we are afraid to doubt, then we are afraid to face the facts that there is so much we do not know, and do not understand. Which is why questions matter.

This is what challenges and comforts in the Book of Job. It may be unsettling, but it is an incredibly *real* book. And that means, not all of the time but some of the time, it asks the hard questions that we might be afraid to ask. For those times when we feel alone in the dark place; for those times when we might wonder what is the point; for those times when we look around us and see only the problems – Job speaks.

For those of you who never have any doubts; who never have faced disappointment; who always find God when you need Him; who can make sense of every situation and for every question have an answer, this sermon is not for you!

But for the rest of us, who have those wobbles in our faith; who don't think we're quite all right; who worry about what tomorrow may bring; who are concerned about what yesterday has been; who have felt that 'thick darkness' has covered us at times – then Job speaks for us, and to us, and about us.

One of the toughest places I have ever visited was the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, just outside Berlin. A bleak place where, in the open air, no birds sang. I remember going from room to room, seeing paintings of flowers on hidden walls because there were no flowers on the site of that camp during the war. Standing on the spot where the gallows stood every day of the year, apart from Christmas Eve, where a Christmas tree was put up in place of the gallows. Standing

by the site where men, women, children had been gassed, burned, turned to ashes. Another room where piles of objects were stored, stripped from the prisoners soon to be dead – suitcases, clothes, spectacles, artificial limbs, a mountain of shoes. Nothing too worthless to be saved, except one thing – life itself.

Jonathan Sacks, the late chief rabbi, on a similar trip, found many questions raised in his mind, but one most insistent was the one he never heard anyone ask. What gave the survivors of the camps the strength to survive, not then, but subsequently?ⁱ It is the question Job wrestles with, covered by thick darkness. Where is God in all of this, and why go on?

Job rails against the, to him, invisible God. Where are you, God? But Job persists, and never gives up. Job's arguing with God remains an act of deep faith. Job does not let God off the hook. Job accuses; Job laments; Job questions. But Job does not let go. Like the survivors of the concentration camps, and survivors of human-made and natural disasters across the world, scarred maybe, questioning definitely, there is a passion for life, and a tenacious hold on it. In small ways, and sometimes large, this hard questioning has helped many to work to build a different world. Some keep their faith in God, others lose it, but most keep their faith in life itself. Somehow, like Job in that darkest moment, with his immense questions, people preserve the lineaments of hope.

That's the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that things are going to get better. Hope is the belief that we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it does need courage to hope.ⁱⁱ And part of that courage is the courage to question, and to ask why, and to ask how, and to ask when.

When there is suffering, pain, injustice, and the huge question of 'why?', I hear another 'why?' question echoing out of the darkness: that of Jesus on the cross, answering Job, where we hear God taking the depth of every human suffering into His own being.

Life in the world is not a fairy tale that always has a happy ending. With Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (also Jews), we must ask to what extent our religious traditions function as opiates to numb pain or are comforting illusions about the nature of reality.ⁱⁱⁱ

Through his persistent, defiant, honest questioning, Job held on to God. So we hold on too, and may be, through our hard questioning, about why things are so bad, we might stumble into how

we might change things, and work out when that might happen. And find, to our surprise, that God hasn't given us the answers, but has given us the questions we need to ask about all life's ills and injustices and scandals.

And *that* is the gospel.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, pps 174-5

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul E Capetz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 4 p150