

Blameless

Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Mark 10:13-16

No, no, no. Nobody is completely like this, are they? *“There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”*

The Book of Job is not for the faint-hearted. Part parable, part philosophical treatise, all theological reflection, it wrestles with some of the great questions that humanity confronts. Why is there evil in the world? Why do innocent people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? What is the relationship between blessing and faith? Do people believe in order to be blessed? Or is faith instead an expression of gratitude because we have been blessed? What happens to faith when blessings appear to vanish?ⁱ

Why do conscientiously healthy people grow terminally ill? How can those who worked and saved for a lifetime lose everything because of some business company or bank malpractice? How could warnings about building cladding, lead to the horror of the Grenfell Tower fire? How can the Middle East, homeland of so many strands of religious faith who have peace somewhere central in their belief, boil over into vicious, endless terrorism and war? Why do people, in employment, sometimes holding down multiple jobs, have to revert to Foodbanks because the cost of living means their minimum wages do not provide a basic standard of living?

The Book of Job was possibly written somewhere in a land that spreads over some of modern-day Israel-Palestine and Jordan, between the 10th and 2nd centuries BC. Its author is unknown. It is an imaginative parable wrapped up in a dramatic presentation replete with superb Hebrew poetryⁱⁱ, asking all the big order why suffering, why injustice, why natural disaster, why undeserved

pain questions. But we are still left asking, is this going to help? When bad things happen to good people, what chance do the rest of us have? Which in itself is a question posed by the use of that word blameless. Who amongst us dares to claim that we lead blameless lives?

Even if we acknowledge our incomplete blamelessness, we're quick to point the accusing finger of blame and accusation at someone or something else. "I may not be perfect, but I'm not as bad as that person." As if identifying more bad people in the world makes it a better place. There are varying degrees of people worthy of blame going around; but I can't help but feel we often point them out to distract from ourselves. And that old adage haunting us: each time we point a finger of blame at others, three other fingers are pointing back at us. In a world-wide blame culture, when we want everyone and everything else to be responsible for all the wrong that is going on, are we too adept at shifting blame on to others to mask or distract when it comes to our own shortcomings and responsibilities?

The Book of Job wrestles with these kinds of arguments, as people then, and now, try to find explanations and reasons for everything that is wrong with the world. One commentator helpfully suggests: First, while some suffering is brought upon ourselves through our own sin and foolishness, at least some, perhaps even most suffering is undeserved; second, to argue the opposite misconstrues the character of the person who suffers unjustly, as well as that of God; and third, how God can be affirmed as good and just in the light of such innocent suffering is a mystery beyond our finite human comprehension.ⁱⁱⁱ

In a world where good and evil exist for whatever reason, might it be the case that why we should look for the causes of good and evil is not simply to understand them, but to work out how we can increase the good things and counter and maybe even eradicate the bad things? Might it be the case that the reason God calls Job blameless is because Job somehow understands or accepts

that good and bad exist in the world, that we do not always understand why they exist, and that part of being human is to survive the good and the bad, and believe that somehow God is with us during both times.

I knew an oncologist some years ago who all his life worked towards finding scientific and medical means to beat cancer. He did much to help many, many people. Not only did he work in hospital laboratories doing medical research he spent time on the cancer wards, and visited hospices. He told me, "I understand bits about why some people get some kinds of cancer, and I know bits about how some treatments will stop the cancer, or at least slow it down for a while. But I go to the hospital wards, and particularly to the hospices, to see what the failed effects treatments have. I am reminded that with all my experience, there are some things I still don't understand, that don't comply to logic, and that some things just are, and we need hospices, and other caring groups and charities, to be there for people when our understanding reaches its current limits. We learn to trust that other help, other support, other kindness will come for the last bit. The Macmillan nurses. The hospice chaplains. The auxiliaries who notice the little things that help in those last hours and moments. The family and friends who don't give up with their love but sit through the dying time until the end." And then the oncologist looked at me and said, "Or as you would say, the continuation."

The blamelessness of Job has to do with writer of Job suggesting that Job didn't see himself at the centre of things, and not dwelling for any length of time on the question, 'Why me?' That oncologist I knew once told me his response to the, 'Why me?' question was, 'Why not you?', which he said he had never been quite brave enough to say.

Because of everything, despite everything, even if only by his fingertips at times, Job refused to put himself in the centre but kept God at the centre. Good things happen, bad things happen,

and in our incomprehension and hurt, in the complexity and unknowing of it all, God remains present.

Whether or not suffering is caused by things or people who we might choose to blame, I believe a more helpful response is to do something about whatever causes the suffering. Of course, I'd rather suffering wasn't there but accepting it for what it is does not mean despairing fatalism. Sometimes, we say, "I'm not putting up with this. I'm going to try to do something to help."

School harvest service last year saw a collection of food for a foodbank, similar to the one we supported last week. I spoke to a Primary 3 girl struggling under the weight of four massive carrier bags filled with bags of pasta and tins of beans and goodness knows what else. I doubt if she had a worked-out socio-economic and cultural response to the eradication of poverty in our city. She said to me, "I'm helping a hungry person today. I hope they like the things I like to eat."

At the Morningside Hope concert last month, I spoke to someone from a nursing home who has early on-set dementia. He enjoyed the classical music, and the sing-along songs, and to me, "I hate losing the words when I speak, but I love these concerts when the words come back to me through the music." Has the dementia been reversed? No. But through concerts we facilitate we help that frustrated gentleman find some of his words again.

At a Church service some years ago a woman with many problems said thank you for, 'Allowing someone like me to come to your church, and those nice people who say hello at the door, and when I sit down in my seat.' Were any of her problems solved? I don't know. But through our being here, sanctuary was found and given and received.

Job, because of or despite suffering clung on to God. That was his blamelessness: refusing to blame people, things, God, for what happened to him. Holding on, foolishly, faithfully. Maybe Job

discovered God sitting in the ashes beside him. That's not in this Bible text. But maybe God is not either.

Sometimes being blameless is believing that even in a world, or circumstances, when every trace of God seems to have vanished, and we ask why we have been forsaken, we still believe, we still hope. We gather around a communion table remembering a dead carpenter on a cross, Who also felt He was forsaken, and died. But Who, somehow, comes back to glimmer hope, to help us not give up, to empower us to keep going on, and to find in our shaky faith, that we are maybe more blameless, and caring, and persevering, and gentle, and loving, and faithful, than we give ourselves credit.

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

Amen

ⁱ J S Randolph Harris, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol4, p124*

ⁱⁱ Mark A Throntveit, *ibid, p123*

ⁱⁱⁱ Mayer Gruber, *Job: Introduction, The Jewish Study Bible, pps 1499-1500*