

Hymns: **443** “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”
 476 “One more step along the world I go”
 159 “Take my life and let it be”
 90 “Sweet is the work, my God, my King”
 347 “Crown him with many crowns”

Readings: **Job 23:1-9 & 16-17**
 Hebrews: 4:12-16

“DOWN BUT NOT OUT”

I didn't have a clue when I chose the title for this morning's sermon but, in the event, I realise that it was intended to refer to Wales! This is how it works. Last night, the score indicated that Bosnia had beaten Wales in a game of football by two goals to zero. But despite losing the match, Wales go through to the finals of the European Cup in France next year. And then, on the very same day, the Australian rugby team beat Wales by fifteen points to six. And yet (yes you've guessed it!) Wales still go through to the knock-out stages of the rugby World Cup. “Down but not out” - a perfect description, prophetically foreseen, to describe the plight of my beloved homeland this particular weekend.

That wasn't, of course, my reason for choosing the title at all. I had been looking at the book of Job and the story of a man who was truly “down but not out”. He'd lost everything – his wife, his children, servants, home and possessions. Everyone around him jumped to the conclusion that he must have done something very, very wrong to have deserved such “punishment”. After all, why else would this have happened to him? His friends gathered round him and tried to console him. But they were especially bitten by the bug that led them to attribute personal guilt to him. He deserved his plight didn't he? What friends!

The passage we heard read earlier is a reply to a speech by one of those friends. Eliphaz by name. He says that God only punishes the wicked, that God saves and protects, that we mortals cannot know God's plans, that Man is naturally vile and unclean in God's eyes, that God punishes sinners in their own lifetime, and that Job must therefore be a rebel and a sinner. None of us can make any difference to God one way or the other.

That's a rough and ready summing-up of the speech of Eliphaz. If I had the time, I could do the same for the arguments put forward by three other friends – Bildad, Zophar and Elihu. Talk about kicking a man when he's down.

And Job was down. As it says in this morning's passage, he was afraid, alone, reduced to silence, enveloped in darkness, far from God.

And yet he's not so far down that he simply rolls over and lets the accusations taunt him. He rebuts the suggestions made repeatedly by his friends. He refuses to admit

that God could possibly be angry with him or that he must himself have done something terribly wrong. In his darkest moments, he refuses to cave in. He can recall nothing in his past life or behaviour that would merit all this suffering. He goes on looking for a silver lining to the dark clouds that are swallowing him up.

If there was evidence of a prophetic note in my choice of a sermon title as far as Welsh sport was concerned, then I can confidently claim that same power on another matter. Last Thursday, I travelled to the county of Rutland to give a lecture to the local Theological Society. I had decided to talk about the Welsh poet R S Thomas. What I didn't know all those months ago when I chose that title (nor did the penny drop with anyone else) was that the day I gave the lecture turned out to be National Poetry Day. So my title was apposite indeed and everybody gave me the credit for having chosen it deliberately for such a special day. I purred with happiness and didn't demur.

R S Thomas, like Job, knew all about darkness and silence and a sense of the absence of God. At one point, confessing to dark thoughts inhabiting every corner of his mind, he writes the following lines:

*I emerge from the mind's
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.*

This sounds like a deep darkness and an absent God to boot. When he tries to describe human life, he does so with an extraordinary metaphor. Just note this:

*One step forward and one
back on the shining tightrope
between dark and dark.*

It's as if there's a mystery attached to the place we come from and sheer darkness about our destination. The only place where we can feel undergirded by any sense of meaning is on "the shining tightrope" that straddles those two points along which we try to make our way forward. And then, a final quotation:

*I close my eyes,
the darkness implies your presence,
the shadow of your steep mind
on my world. I shiver in it.
It is not your light that
can blind us; it is the splendour
of your darkness.*

God is absent, and we sometimes feel his absence; this sense of God's absence can be compared to "a room I enter from which someone has just gone". It's frustrating. So annoying. God – the great absentee.

We must learn from Job – our sufferings are not automatically a punishment for wrong-doing. He clung fast to his faith even in the darkest times. "Give me my day

in court”, he pleaded, “I know I can prove my case.” That’s one shout from the dark place he finds himself in. And then another: “I am not reduced to silence by the darkness, or by the mystery that surrounds God.”

When confronted with such darkness, when feeling at one’s wits end, what on earth is one to do? R S Thomas has an answer for that question too.

*What
to do but, like Michelangelo’s
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?*

Yes, we must be brave; we must do our best not to give up hope. But sometimes it’s only by facing the dark, entering the unknown, embracing the mysterious realm beyond us, that we have any chance of discovering whether there’s meaning or sustenance or hope out there in the dark. We Christians, of course, have an advantage over Job. For we are enjoined to put our trust in a God who has given us Jesus Christ – who can stand alongside us in our suffering for he too has suffered, he has been tested in every way just as we are.

But back to those friends. Why does suffering attract sympathy of the wrong sort? When we pass an accident on the motorway we find ourselves “rubber-necking” as we look pruriently in the direction of that event. We seem drawn to suffering. And if we approach a friend who’s suffering, we do (or at least I do) find ourselves in all sorts of contortions. There’s denial – we try to pretend that things are not as we see them to be. We indulge in half-truths, we simply recognise that things are bad but suggest that tomorrow they’ll be better. We offer placebos, we suggest that trying a little harder or being brave or pulling up one’s socks will somehow alleviate the bleakness of the suffering. We engage in wishful thinking, this time next week it’ll all be over and we’ll wonder what we were worrying about. Or else we tell lies; of course you’re getting better, there’s nothing wrong really, It’ll all blow over.

And when we indulge in such fantasies or misconceptions or deceptions, we are simply putting ourselves where the friends of Job were to be found. We’ve all known friends like that. We’ve all been friends like that.

About fifteen years ago, we had someone named Job here at Wesley’s Chapel. He was a big man in every sense of the word – big-hearted and big of stature too. He’d had a noble life. He was Fijian. He’d served in the British army but, like so many of his compatriots, failed to claim his rights to remain in Britain when he left the army. He was a carpenter by trade and, for a while, eked out his existence through plying his trade. But that too became too much for him. He suffered the blow of his wife’s death – Louie was the light of his life and her loss was a bitter blow. We took him on as our caretaker for a while but he was increasingly lame and it was difficult even for him to get here. I recall looking out of my bedroom window many a time and seeing Job, just arrived on the premises, stretched out on one of the flat tombstones in the yard. He was gathering his strength in readiness for his day’s work.

Job was a lovely man and we all hated to see going downhill. It was in that pitiable state that he received the visit of three people who pretended to be his friends:

- First, it was the Angel of Death who crept in and robbed Job of the one person who made life meaningful for him.
- And then there was the immigration lawyer who said, “yes I can help you. You’ll need me to write a letter for you. Leave it to me. I’ll do what I can and, be sure that something good will happen.” All those comforting words before he added, “that’ll be £1000.” And you can guess that his letter achieved nothing at all.
- And then there were our wretched immigration officials. Once they got their claws into Job they wouldn’t let him go. So he went absent without leave. He travelled off into a far country – Lincolnshire to be exact. And there he died in a small room all alone. When they found his body, the telephone was off its hook. Either someone had been trying to get through to him or else he was attempting to make a call.

We buried his ashes together Louie’s in our garden of remembrance in the hope that they have come boldly unto the throne of grace, that they have received mercy and found grace to help them in their time of need. And that they rest together in peace.

So Job turns out to be a man for all seasons. His plight, the plight of countless others. And his fate should be a stark reminder that, but for the grace of God, that could have been the way our lives turned out too.

So let us cling to the God who clings to us; let us put our hand out into the darkness hoping/expecting to find the reciprocating touch. Let’s draw strength from the example of Job.

Amen