

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Job 38 vv 1-11 p538 II Corinthians 6 vv 1-13
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	p1161 Mark 4 vv 35-41 p1006

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may by thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

James 5¹¹: *Behold we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy.*

Job was a very good man and a very prosperous man. Do you think that the two went together, his wealth and his goodness? Did God bless Job with a large and prosperous family and a multitude of rich possessions because he was a good man? Did God reward Job for his faithfulness by making him wealthy? Or was it the other way round? Job had an extremely comfortable life. He had much to be thankful for. Was it for this reason that he was a good man? He had no reason to strive, to lie, to cheat or to steal. He had every reason to thank God for his life and every opportunity to do good to the poor. He enjoyed the respect of his neighbours and he was generous to those in need. But was this just because he was rich? Would he still be a good man if he were poor, if he lost everything? Satan thought not. God pointed Job out to Satan as an example of a good and faithful human being. The devil responded by asking God, *Doth Job fear God for nought?* He reminded God how richly He had blessed Job and insisted that Job would very soon curse God if it were all taken away from him.

God allowed Satan to try the experiment, to take away all those blessings which God had given Job. Satan's power is always limited by God. That is why we know that we shall not be tempted beyond what we can bear. *God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.* I Corinthians 10¹³). Life can be very grim indeed at times, but God remains in control and God is love.

Satan, therefore, arranged a series of accidents in which Job's possessions were destroyed and his children killed. The horror is unimaginable, but these things do happen in the world today. People have to bear the most horrendous burdens. Everybody is different and people respond differently to tragedy and disaster. Some people face up to life's challenges with astonishing fortitude, but some are crushed. It is not for us to judge other people for how they respond to trouble. Our place is to be as comforting as we can. We're not to impose our agenda on people who are suffering. Everybody's life is unique. We're here to help in accordance with their needs, not ours.

Job's response to all this is to continue to worship God. He *shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped. And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.* This is obviously true, but it is also very tough. S Paul takes up the same theme in his First Letter to Timothy (6⁷): *For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.* Obviously true, sobering, we often read these words of Job and Paul at funerals.

The LORD points out to Satan that Job has passed Satan's test. He has lost everything and still he is faithful to God. Some people lose their faith when the world seems to be collapsing all around them. Some people cleave all the more firmly to God when great troubles come. For some people, remarkably, it seems to make no difference. What they believe about God doesn't apparently change whatever their experience of the world.

Satan demands another test. Cynically and scornfully the devil implies that Job didn't care about his possessions or even his family so long as he himself was all right. God allows Satan to afflict Job with

boils, which itch so much that he has to scratch them with a piece of broken pottery. *Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.* Job believes that everything comes from the LORD and, despite everything that has happened to him, he still puts his trust in God.

Then Job's comforters arrive on the scene. Job's comforters are notorious for not being much comfort. It was good of them to come and Job probably appreciated the fact that they did, but, given what they had to say, they would have done better to have kept quiet. They were attempting to impose their own agenda on Job. Quite a lot of what they said was true, but it wasn't much help in the context. Their words just made the sick man's sufferings worse.

Job is still talking to God. He hasn't entirely lost faith. But he is questioning God. Why is all this happening to him? What has he done to deserve it? He's been a good person. He's done his best. So why is he suffering so? Or look at Paul's account of what he has endured for the Gospel in our New Testament lesson today. If God is all powerful and just, why do good people suffer so much? It's a question which has been debated for thousands of years. There is no single answer which explains everything at an intellectual level. It's something which philosophers and theologians speculate about. It's something which is very puzzling for pastors. Suffering people and those who love them may cry out as Job did. There are partial answers which can help, such as the one Paul gives to the Corinthians – that his sufferings are making the Gospel more real to himself and to the people to whom he is preaching. There are many other attempted accountings for human suffering, more or less helpful, but none is a complete explanation of the problem of evil, of why there should be so much pain in a world created and sustained by God Who is love. The Cross of Jesus is the ultimate answer if our hearts can receive it. But it would be to behave like one of Job's so-called comforters if one insisted on its truth to one who was not in a position to accept it.

In order to get to our OT lesson, I have to fast forward to Job chapter 38. God doesn't answer Job's questions. He reminds Job that the One Who made heaven and earth is infinitely more wonderful than we can begin to understand. We can't know the answers to all the profound questions we ask. It is good and right to question but there are times when we have to accept that the answers are beyond us. *Ye have heard of the patience of Job.* The word for patience is *υπομονη*, which could be translated *patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness or perseverance*. This is the quality for which Job is known. It's a rocky ride he's on, but he clings onto God. At the end of the book, Job comes to understand something more of the infinite greatness of God. *I have uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me which I knew not...Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.* At this stage in his life's journey, Job has attained to this level of comprehension. God is not pleased with the comforters. *My wrath is kindled against thee,* he says to Eliphaz, the first of the three comforters, *and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right as my servant Job hath.*

Ye have heard of the patience of Job. Job has maintained his integrity. He has clung on in faith despite all the terrible things which have happened to him. Ultimately, God restores to him his possessions and Job begets a new family.

So what light does our Gospel have to shed on all this – on the stories of Job and of Paul, and on our own stories, the stories of all who confront trouble and pain in their daily lives? The disciples did what Jesus told them to do and set out across the lake in the boat. They obeyed Jesus. Jesus was with them in the boat. They knew that, but when the storm arose, He didn't seem to care. He was asleep on a pillow. *They awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?* A good question, one we might have asked sometimes. *He arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith? And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?* Well, He is our Lord Jesus Christ, our friend and our brother.