

Job 38: 1-8, 34-41

### **Encounter**

### **Questions**

Questions are a sign of an enquiring mind. On the one hand a parent or grandparent will be delighted that a child is asking questions, seeking to learn, interacting with them and no doubt they will do their best not only to deal with the immediate issue but to encourage ongoing enquiry and build the relationship so that exploration and development is encouraged. However, it does become a bit wearing if every answer offered is followed up with another, and particularly, if the child's answer is simply why? Every well thought out, carefully considered answer is countered with another why? And it becomes apparent that this line of question and answer is never going to end. Sometimes it is because the child is eager to get to the bottom of the issue and dig deeper and deeper; sometimes you wonder if they just want to keep you with them, giving them your attention. They may or may not be hanging on your every word, but they do enjoy that you are spending time with them. Now while that is a good thing and needs carefully handling – there will be times when you will need to explain that you must go and make their tea or whatever needs to be done. But perhaps there is a lesson there we need to hold on to – sometimes answers are important but at other times relationship is even more significant than the answers. And that is as true with God as it is in our dealings with human beings – adults as well as children.

### **Seeking answers**

Job had been through the mill, he'd endured loss; had suffered even more from his well-meaning friends whose "comfort" had only made him feel worse; to top it all his honest prayers, complaints and appeals to God for justice seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. To say he was down or at his wit's end would be an understatement. It just wasn't fair. Children are often quick to pick up on injustice – and not only to recognise it, but to call it out – and they want action taken to it put right. As adults we tend to be less clear cut on demanding action (possibly because we are more aware of the conflicts involved) but perhaps we need to be more willing to take a leaf out of a child's book? Job's predicament highlights the problem people of faith can have if they sense that somehow GOD lies at the heart of their difficulties. Not only is there no-one "higher up" to complain to, but faith can be called into question because God isn't supposed to be unjust – and if he is perceived to be unjust what does that say about your understanding of God, his nature, your relationship to him? God doesn't go out of his way to mess us about, to inflict suffering and doubt upon us; he IS by his very nature loving. But there certainly are many, many people caught up in all manner of suffering and injustice in the world. You can't help but ask questions such as why does God allow suffering, what is he doing about it? There are no simple answers; sometimes the most honest answer is that we don't know but that isn't likely to satisfy. The one thing that I believe is NOT the right answer is that he doesn't care. It may seem that way but that is not the truth. Everything we know about Jesus would counter that. BUT that is not to take away from the real hurt, suffering and sense of distance from God that many experience. Seeking after God can be hard especially in the face of abject suffering and injustice – but even

when, like Job, it feels as though you are wading through mud or groping about in total darkness, the seeking is not wasted. Asking questions is important – even if the answers are really slow in coming. For, like the multiple questions of the child, they show a desire (at the deepest level) for an ongoing relationship. The Psalms are full of honest questioning of God, expression of doubt, complaints against God BUT the psalmist is still speaking to God, maybe ranting at times, asking God what he is playing at, BUT he is still seeking God, as was Job. And maybe that is a lesson for us too – perhaps a difficult one because, society nowadays demands instant answers, immediate responses and we take badly to waiting – and we’re having to do a lot more waiting – but tough as it is waiting for God isn’t pointless. For waiting for God can be waiting WITH God, for deep down he is there for us even when we don’t necessarily sense him with us. Keep on keeping on, persist, be patient, God’s hold on us is far greater than our hold on him. He WILL come through – which is not to suggest that the pain and anguish of enduring suffering is insignificant. Job’s comforters were full of good intentions but their suggestion that he must be at fault, that he should snap out of things, admit his guilt and get things sorted with God didn’t really cut it. It didn’t deal with Job’s profound sense of injustice or remoteness from God. Perhaps the first rule for making progress on these issues is to admit that there are no easy answers.

### **Unexpected answers**

Remember we’ve jumped many chapters to get to today’s passage. There’s been all sorts of interaction – between Job and his friends, from Job towards God – Job has poured out his heart, he has endured suffering upon suffering and apparently no response from God – nothing – silence. And that silence just compounded things for Job ; not hearing from God simply made things worse. So now, finally, in Chapter 38 he gets a response from God – but not the one he was expecting. In the face of his suffering and sense of injustice Job might have expected some gentle words of comfort and reassurance from God, something like Elijah’s still small voice of calm but no – it’s more like the earthquake, wind and fire. The writer has God reply in uncompromising terms – reminding Job of the Lord’s majesty, his authority over creation, over humanity. As one commentator put it – it was a thundering reproach of the kind that would require Cecil B de Mille to direct the scene and Brian Blessed to play the lead role. God speaks out of the whirlwind, and into the maelstrom of Job’s questions and complaints. It was loud, direct and surprisingly to the point. It wasn’t at all what Job was looking for – but it was, finally, a response.

You might have thought that Job would have felt aggrieved. After all his suffering and his outspoken criticism of God he almost certainly was hoping at the very least for an acknowledgement of his predicament, of the injustice he felt. But that is really for next week. For now, let’s just explore God’s response a little more and tease out how and why God sometimes answers us in surprising ways.

Do you remember the picture questions that sometimes appeared on some TV quiz shows? The camera had zoomed in, and we were only shown a small part of the object, perhaps multiplied up many times, or taken from an unusual angle – and the contestants (and the viewer) had to guess what the object was. Of course, the picture was framed to confuse, to challenge and to entertain – and sometimes the guesses were both widely

out and funny. Sometimes someone would come up with the right answer but sometimes no-one got the correct answer, and everyone was surprised when the object was revealed in its entirety. Job gets a remarkable portrayal of the power and wonder of God in creation with the spectacular whirlwind. The recent Hurricane Ida in the Eastern United States with the massive power of the wind whipping up buildings and subsequent flooding causing widespread devastation reminded us that we human beings are not always in as much control of things as would like to think. We can question why the likes of Covid should have caused so many deaths, illness, heartache and disruption to so many. Do we blame God? Is it his fault? I don't believe that God was gunning for Job (nor that he gets at us); I don't think it is a case of being hit again while being already down. But Job is given a spectacular demonstration of the power of God in the visual imagery of the whirlwind but more than that he hears GOD, loud and clear. In dramatic poetry Job is challenged to face up to the majesty of God and his own relative insignificance. Instead of getting direct answers to his many questions it is God who poses all sorts of questions to him. Questions about creation and God's sovereignty, questions about Job's place in the grand scheme of things. There is some resonance with Psalm 8 where the psalmist is drawn to wonder about both the scale and magnificence of God's hand in the vastness of the universe as he looks at the sky and the stars AND God's interest, care and love for him as a mere human being. Job takes in God's answer that he is the great Creator of the universe but at the same time he cares for HIM, one solitary human being, albeit one who has had a lot to put up with. As to the difficult questions God poses – for Job, and possibly for us, the answer is that there are no simple solutions. There is a complicated collection of pointers towards the truth, but no hard and fast categorical solution – the nearest is that the answer lies with God – and yes, his ways are higher than our ways. At the risk of being overly simplistic might I suggest that later, when God sent his Son among us to love us and save us, we were given a clearer pointer as to the nature of God and of his relationship with us? As we go forward perhaps our best option would be to go on seeking God, to go on asking questions but even more than that to look to deepen our relationship with God our heavenly Father. Like the child – we do want answers but more than that we want a relationship, we want to know that we are loved. May the Lord bless you! Amen.