

Job 23

Yesterday morning, at approximately 6.30am. Little footsteps from upstairs, well, big thuds actually, at high volume. Join me in the lounge while I'm trying to work. "Are you ready?" "Ready for what?" "Ready to go fishing!" "What?" "You said we could go fishing this morning!" - "No, I said we could go fishing if the weather was ok!" "You're just using that as an excuse to get out of what you promised! You promised us we could go fishing, and look - the weather's fine!" "No - the weather's dark!" "You have to start getting ready because if the weather's okay, we're going fishing..." And so the conversation went on - and in the end, the last words in the conflict came from Stefan, who wasn't even sure what he was complaining about when he concluded, "there's no justice in this house!" Well, in the end I was so confused by their legal mumbo jumbo that I had to comply with their demands. I had promised - after all - so early in the morning we went off to the Great Ouse with fishing equipment that cause no concern whatsoever to the fish that swim there.

There's no justice in this house! Those were words that stuck with me though. They are almost a summary of the reading from Job. Job has had all this horrific stuff happening to him. The devil has robbed him of virtually everything but his life, his family, his possessions, his health - it's all gone. And he wants justice - as an upright man, he wants his case to be heard. (And by an upright man, it simply means one in whose favour a court will rule!) But there is no justice, there is no court, there is no ruling, there is no court of appeal.

When you hear this story, as an Israelite, you know that it is not just a random story about a bloke that's been included in the bible because it has a happy ending. These individual stories appear in Scripture because they speak of how God deals with his people. And if you were to imagine a stage of Israel's history when the whole of Israel could be summarised with what had happened to Job - it is in the period of the exile - about six centuries before Christ. The promised land had been invaded, and all of its leading inhabitants were carried off into Exile in Babylon, a thousand miles away. And there, these people sat and wept. These people, many of them utterly bemused by what had happened, could not understand why - when they worshipped the God of heaven and earth - that they had been conquered by a hostile force and taken into captivity. For many, it was the end of their world. If you had to describe this situation in poetic form, there is no better way to do it than with the story of Job.

This is a people who, at the hands of the Babylonians, have suffered the worst kind of suffering. Their land, their home, their friends, their family have been killed, destroyed, tortured. But that is not the end. The wealthiest, noblest, leaders, who see the temple lying in ruins, are now led off to an alien land where there are many temples, and they are much bigger, and they carry into that strange land nothing other than their clothes. If you can just stop to picture the conditions, the realities, the horror of what those exiles experienced - is there really, any better way to describe it in pictorial form, than in the person of Job!

Naturally, Job voices his complaint. There *is* no justice in this house. And the objections that we hear from Job throughout the book, are precisely the objections of Israel when she is in exile. Job speaks for a people who have been abandoned by justice, by hope, and by God. Job speaks for a people who have lost everything except the clothes on their back and the breath in their lungs. If you immerse yourself in the history of Israel, and then read Job, I think it is quite hard not to read it this way. And there is no short cut to a happy ending - each of Job's conversation partners seem to offer different theories of how to cope, and it's

fascinating that those conversations are still to be heard in the strategies of self-help, psychotherapy and church growth documents that are being written today.

And today, I wonder where the exiles are! I don't suppose we have to look too far around the world to find examples. One obvious place is in Iraq. A people who have been trampled upon, no less by their new democracy-loving dictators as by the old regime. And so we read of how British soldiers have taken and killed innocent people, and subsequent cover-ups by Military Police, and then by British Politicians. High court judges published their findings on Friday, and they found their way into no British newspapers – apart from a short piece in the Guardian. Who hears about these and numerous other atrocities? When the papers refuse to report it because... well, who knows why, you can't help thinking, that there is no justice in this house. If you are a farmer who has been dragged from a field and tortured in a British army camp, and if you are a survivor of this kind of atrocity, but no one hears your story – are you not in good company with Job?

But... thank God for Rowan Williams. He has to preach at a memorial service for servicemen killed in the conflict. The Queen is there, the prime minister is there, and in the second row, Mr and Mrs Blair. It should have been a service praising the courage of our lads – which the sermon did. But it also lamented the cowardice of those who led us into war! The Bishop, with simple, dazzling insight, points out that we not only salute those soldiers who sacrificed their lives. But that we recognise what sacrifice is. That we recognise the sacrifice of listening properly to the people of Iraq, a political sacrifice too costly for politicians with other plans.

But there is another sort of cost involved in holding back the easy instinctive response and checking that you are genuinely doing something for the sake of long-term building or healing: a cost in putting up with boredom and frustration in the course of operations; in setting aside prejudice and resentment to get to know a strange culture and feel with and for its people. These are all part of the cost, the sacrifice, involved in seeking a better and more secure life for people who have suffered outrageously.

Not surprisingly, Rowan Williams found himself in all sorts of trouble. Because, after all, he did mount a scathing attack on any who colluded with the desire to go to war in Iraq. The sermon is very carefully worded, but it is brilliant theology, and good theology will always expose cowardly politics.

And of course, much of the rhetoric used to justify the war, was spent, not listening to those behind the attacks on the trade towers, not listening to those in cultures that we don't understand well. The rhetoric was safety and security for you and me, for people like us – we are the people who need to be heard. Not them. And, whilst it is not true of every Iraqi person I have spoken to, it certainly is true of many – that they could throw up their hands in despair with all that has happened to them in recent years, and say “there is no justice in this house!”

The cost of hearing some of these people, as Rowan Williams suggest, the cost of making sure that their voice is heard, that there is a court of appeal for them, is not one that is going to win you any popularity points today. I'm sure the tabloids will have a field day with the archbishop, and accuse him of not supporting our lads... blah blah blah. IN fact, immediately having written this, I looked at what the Sun said – and amongst all the predictable stuff,

accused Rowan Williams of “an astonishing breach of convention!” What a fantastic definition of radical Christian discipleship in the modern world – “an astonishing breach of convention!”

I suppose the same is true when we focus on the personal as well as the political dimension of Job. Not many of us will have suffered in precisely the way that Job has suffered, nor in the way that the people of Iraq have suffered. But many of us will know what it is to feel in your bones that “there is no justice in this house!”

Laying aside the fact that there are plenty of emotional, relational and spiritual hyper-condriacs who will always claim to have been abandoned by justice, pastoral-energy hoovers in constant demand of spiritual maintenance, there are nevertheless – times when we genuinely feel that there is no justice! A total frustration at the helplessness of the situation that we face – the worst kind of powerlessness. Again, we have to be a little bit careful of the poor-old-me syndrome. The desire for our voice to be heard is naturally a powerful. But it is always worth comparing with our desire to hear others. If our constant demand is to be heard, and yet we show little willingness to listen properly, then we share the kind of cowardice that Rowan Williams spells out at the political level – when a nation, obsessed with its own security and wellbeing, shows absolutely zero willingness to listen to another nation, another people, whose ways of life are strange and contradict our values. Who was it that said there is a reason God gave us two ears but only one mouth?

It was Jesus who declared that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. If we are wealthy, and secure, then our capacity for self-delusion is considerable. We see it in the rich man who prematurely claimed to have kept all the commandments. We see it in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a rich man who simply could not hear the Lazarus who had lived outside his doorstep.

But still, there will be times when, with good cause, we do feel that there is no justice in this house. Where friends pray on our behalf, not knowing why God is allowing something to happen to us. Not knowing why it seems that God has abandoned us. And what is our response then? We can be sure that Job did not just do the Christian thing of putting on a smily face to prove that he was a mature Christian. That he did not strengthen his resolt, to prove that he was a good, Stoic, super-Christian hard man. Although Job did not curse God, he did acknowledge what his situation was, he did seem to question why there was no justice, why there was no court of appeal, why his situation should be so hopeless.

But what did he do? Can we find Job constructing a solution to deal with the problems that he faced? Well, if you look at today’s passage and those that follow it, we simply hear Job crying out for justice. And I wonder if there are moments when that is all that we can do!

If there is no justice in this house, the temptation can be to make our own justice! To take the law into our own hands. Having three boys, I see that on a daily basis. Alice accidentally treads on a fishing rod that forces a hook into big brother’s finger. When he is hurt, what is big brother’s reaction to little sister? Is it too ask dad for justice? Or to exact revenge from enemy? To forge the world around us in our own image. To allow bitterness to have its way. Job doesn’t do that, in the same way that the psalmists don’t do that. And neither does Job give up hope. Instead, he cries for justice. He asks God for justice. He asks God for a hearing in a heavenly court room. He asks God to hear his case, and to act justly. If we stand in front of God, would we dare to ask for justice, or would justice be the last thing we want?