

Adventuring

4 Advent Reflections for groups or individuals in the second half of life

Week Three: Job

Job's life collapsed around him. His health deteriorated, he lost his loved ones and those who had looked up at him now looked down on him in the misery of his condition. Job in his earlier life, amidst prosperity, never doubted God's goodness or God's purposes. But now he saw no sense in what was happening in his life. At times he railed against God and in other moments he felt his further existence to be useless. Indeed, in the light of his current state, his whole life felt an empty sham, devoid of meaning. And where was God? And why didn't prayer work the same way that it once had? And how had all his former certainties crumbled away? Job's friends insisted he must have done something to deserve his fate. But Job resisted this easy equation. What had happened had happened; and no reason could be found.

Amidst his puzzlement and confusion Job never let go of his faith in God. Doubt was large in his life, and he could not understand what was going on, but he held on to God and knew at some deep level that God did not let go of him. Faith and doubt are sometimes seen as opposites. But faith is not certainty; faith is the choice to trust amidst uncertainty, and sometimes despite what we feel.



Older age as meeting with mystery Life is never anything we can wholly manage or control, though the illusion that we might be able to lingers long. We do what we can, but there will be always be unexpected experiences: events that are neither planned nor wanted. There will be unexpected gift too: the wonder of the beauty we encounter and the kindness shown us though unearned and unsought. Older age can sharpen our sensitivity to the pain of loss and our gratitude for gift. More and more we recognise the limits of our understanding. Former certainties crumble. Life is greyer than the black and white world of clear answers we were brought up to believe in.

Jesus meets us in the muddle of reality. He too struggled to make sense of things. His faith, in the midst of doubt, was to hold on to the goodness of God in the face of dark and difficult experiences.

'Do not human beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a labourer?

Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like labourers who look for their wages,
so I am allotted months of emptiness,
and nights of misery are apportioned to me.

When I lie down I say, "When shall I rise?"

But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn.

My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt;
my skin hardens, then breaks out again.

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,
and come to their end without hope.

'Remember that my life is a breath;
my eye will never again see good.

The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone. As the cloud fades and vanishes,
so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;
they return no more to their houses,
nor do their places know them any more.

'Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

[Job 7: 1-11]

O that my words were written down!

O that they were inscribed in a book!

O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock for ever!

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

My heart faints within me!

[Job 19: 21-27]

Questions for reflection and sharing;

1. Do you think it fitting that Job's doubting and questioning is included in the Bible? Is it helpful for you? In what ways?
2. Where in your life do you 'meet mystery'? What different types of experience fill you with wonder?
3. Can you remember a time when you felt a little like Job in these passages? What was the fruit of those times? What happened within your relationship with God during these times of uncertainty?

What is it time for you to do?

The days of Advent are short; we live much of our lives in the dark of night. On some days spring seems impossibly far away. Yet this season too is part of a cycle of growth.

In Advent we turn to God with the honesty of what is in our hearts: our longings, our pains, our questions and our hopes. Be honest in this way in your prayer; allow God to meet you as you are, not as you ought to be.

Some Advent challenges:

1. The psalms are prayers of the heart. Write your own psalm to God, expressing what you feel and what you long for.
2. At the end of Job's questioning, God shows him the wonders of the created world and Job falls silent, overcome with such mystery. Spend 5 minutes each day this week being present to something in the created world around you: the stars on a clear night, or the intricate shapes of trees, the sounds of birdsong or the changing patterns of the sky. Be alive with all your senses to what is before you. Let this 'silence' of your attentiveness lead you into prayer.

Discipline

Throw away thy rod
Throw away thy wrath:
O my God,
Take the gentle path.

For my hearts desire
Unto thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.

Not a word or look
I affect to own
But by book,
And thy book alone.

Though I fail, I weep;
Though I halt in pace,
Yet I creep
To the throne of grace

Then let wrath remove
Love will do the deed:
For with love
Stony hearts will bleed.

Love is swift of foot;
Love's a man of warre,
And can shoot,
And can hit from farre.

Who can scape his bow?
That which wrought on thee
Brought thee low,
Needs must work on me.

Throw away thy rod
Though man frailties hath,
Thou are God:
Throw away thy wrath. [George Herbert]

Prayer: Lord when the waves of our doubt overwhelm us,
hold us safe in your care.
When we do not wholly understand your way,
keep us on the path that leads to life.
When we turn from you in our confusion
seek us out and draw us home.
Grant us the openness of heart to meet you in mystery,
and to place our hope in your love.