

The dark side of Creation

Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 18th October 2009 (Trinity 19)

Text: Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Last week we celebrated harvest. We thanked God for a *fruitful Creation* that gave us everything we needed to sustain our life and well being. The children sang the old favourite:

All things bright and beautiful
All creatures great and small.
All things wise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all.

Indeed, the Creation that we celebrated last Sunday was a bright and beautiful creation, a creation in which things are arranged to benefit us. This is what you may call the 'bright side' of creation. There is another side, the 'dark side'. We seldom, if ever, talk about it in church. But there is also a song about this side, written by the creators of Monty Python:

All things dull and ugly,
All creatures, short and squat,
All things rude and nasty,
The Lord God made the lot.

Each little snake that poisons,
Each little wasp that stings,
He made their prudish venom,
He made their horrid wings.

All things sick and cancerous,
All evil great and small,
All things foul and dangerous,
The Lord God made them all.

Each nasty little hornet,
Each beastly little squid,
Who made the spiky urchin?
Who made the sharks? He did!

All things scant and ulcerous,
All pox both great and small,
Putrid, foul and gangrenous,
The Lord God made them all.

As with so much humour at the church's expense from those outside the church, this little ditty is cuttingly to the point. We Christians sing 'All things bright and beautiful' at the top of our voices, and quietly sweep under the carpet the inconvenient truth that much of creation apparently simply doesn't fit that picture.

Job knew all about this ‘dark side’ of creation. He was a godly man quietly minding his own business. Then suddenly, a series of disasters struck. Raiding nomads from other tribes and various freak weather phenomena contrived to kill all of his children and destroy much of his possessions in a quick succession of blows. He himself developed a horrible skin condition, leaving him not only sore and sleepless, but also a social outcast. Even his wife counselled assisted suicide – ‘Curse God and die!’ she said (2:9).

Three of Job’s friends came to visit him. They counselled Job to repent of his sins. Why? Because they have read their Bibles – God is a just God, so that those who suffer must have sinned. In increasingly shrill tones, Job’s friends urged him to confess his secret faults so that God might heal him and restore his fortune. But Job didn’t play ball. He maintained that, as far as he knew, he was not harbouring any secret, unconfessed sin. Again, in increasingly shrill tones, he told his friends to stop fitting him into their own theological straightjacket, and demanded an answer from God.

God had indeed been silent throughout Job’s dialogue with his friends. Now, at the beginning of Chapter 38, we read ‘the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind ...’ (38:1) and took Job on a tour of Creation.

In Chapter 38 God showed Job a series of physical phenomena. Job was taken to the remotest reaches of time and space – to the ‘foundation of the earth’ and to Orion and other constellations. I will come back to these. Nearer home, God gave Job a grand-circle view of freak weather – torrential rain, snow and hail storms, thunder and lightning.

At the end of Chapter 38 and Chapter 39, the focus shifts to the animate Creation. God now played David Attenborough, and introduced Job to a series of animals. All but one were undomesticatable and useless to humans – lions, ravens, mountain goats, wild ass, wild oxen, and ostriches. The one exception is the horse; but we are talking here of the war horse in its *destructive* rage.

Then, finally, in Chapters 40 and 41, God moves onto the famous Behemoth and Leviathan, mythical beasts that have baffled commentators for two thousand years. But whatever their identities, these beasties are formidable and fearsome, approachable only by God.

And there, with the fiery breath of Leviathan hanging in the air, the whirlwind tour of Creation ends. You have to admit that the Creator made a curious choice of itinerary. What Job saw was not exactly ‘All things bright and beautiful,’ was it? Instead, Job’s tour guide seemed to have gone for the Monty Python version of the hymn! Freak weather, wild, untameable animals, and Behemoth and Leviathan, fearsome misfits untouchable by all but God alone. If the tour had taken place today, I have the feeling that God might have included flesh-eating bacteria and giant tsunamis. No, this was not exactly a tour of ‘All things bright and beautiful.’

Amazingly, Job thought that *this* tour of creation constituted a more-than-adequate ‘answer’ from God. Why? The short answer is, ‘I don’t really know.’ A longer answer is, ‘But I think I have some clues.’ In particular, I think there is an important clue from God’s description of torrential rain in a part of Chapter 38 that wasn’t part of our

reading today: ‘Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?’ (v25ff) Job, of course, knew that rain was the source of life-giving water, and, being a godly sort of chap, he would have regularly thanked God for it. We do, too – every harvest we thank God for sending us ‘snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain/The breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain.’ Here, Job is (and we are) reminded that the same God who sends that life-giving rain on arable land is the God who sends ‘torrents’ of water onto the ‘waste and desolate land’, a land that is ‘empty of human life.’ Presumably, if Job, or any of us had created and ruled the world, we would have arranged things so that such ‘wastage’ does not occur. What is the point, after all, of watering desolate land? It’s such a waste! In the same way, we would have ordered the world in such a way that godly folk never suffers.

But we didn’t make the world. God did. And God actually made a world in which rain in habitable parts of the earth falls alongside rain over uninhabitable parts. Now, by affirming that it was *God* who made rain to fall on the desert, the author of the Book of Job seems to be saying that it is not possible to have a world in which such ‘waste’ doesn’t happen. In other words, there is no possible world in which rain simply falls on Job and his farm, and does not get wasted in torrents over deserts. If you want the one, you have to have the other. More generally, there is no world in which there is only benign weather for our benefit, without ‘freak’ weather patterns that may cause us harm. And so on.

The author admitted that the reasons for this state of affairs were deeply mysterious. He or she had God repeatedly asking Job, ‘Do you understand any of this?’ The implication is that we *have* to understand this if we are to understand the problem of suffering in a ‘good’ creation. Interestingly, the author seems to be content to leave it to us to ponder, rather than hand us answers on a plate.

As I’ve said already, I don’t have any of the answers. But I have been pondering for twenty years. So let me share with you two strands of my thoughts. First, note what the book of Job rules *out*, The story in chapters 1 to 37 definitely rules *out* the quick and easy answer – that the wasted rain and freak weather and useless creatures and fearsome Leviathans, are due to sin. That easy answer was the answer of Job’s friends. The story is told in such a way as to lead us to conclude that they were wrong. God says as much at the end of the book in Chapter 42. I admit that this throws a spanner in the works in the way we interpret Genesis 4 and Romans 8. But that is how annoyingly complicated the Bible is – it admits of no easy, black and white answers.

That’s my first conclusion. A second conclusion relates directly to my profession as a scientist. God repeatedly asked Job if he understood. The questions were rhetorical – presumably expecting the answer, ‘No, I don’t understand.’ Interestingly, three thousand years later, we do understand a little better than Job.

For example, we now know that in Orion and other constellations, old, worn-out stars regularly explode. These unimaginably violent explosions send out clouds of dust that forms the ingredients for making new stars. This star dust is the source of all the carbon and oxygen and other vital elements that make up our bodies: no stellar

explosions, no us. But one day, the same kind of explosion will destroy our solar system, taking us and all life with it.

We now know that way back at ‘the foundation of the earth’, our planet is the scene of unimaginably violent volcanic activities. Such activities bring all the elements from that star dust up from the core of the earth to the surface, making them available to make life. On geological time scales, such volcanic activities are still vital to the global recycling of chemical elements. But they also give rise to tsunamis.

This year is the 150th anniversary of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Since Darwin, we have understood that mutations and natural selection produced beautiful tropical fish and Beethoven. But the same processes also gave rise to viruses and Hitler. Global warming has alerted us to the interconnectedness of the earth’s climate: altering one part will affect all other parts. So, removing freak storms over the desert may well stop rain over arable lands as well!

In other words, modern science has shown us that the universe is one seamless whole, in which the things that we find ‘bright and beautiful’ and things that we find ‘rude and nasty’ are very intricately linked indeed. You can’t have one without the other. No one has to sin to bring about this state of affairs. Whatever sin is responsible for, and it is responsible for an awful lot, we can’t blame it for freak storms and Leviathans! Instead, however painful or baffling it is, we have to affirm that ‘The Lord God [indeed] made them all.’

Job did not have the benefit of this understanding from modern science. Nevertheless, when he was confronted with the fact that the same creator was indeed responsible for both the light and dark side of creation, he thought it was enough. He fell down and worshipped and emerged a changed man. We know he was changed because the author included an interesting detail right at the end of his story:

‘In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters [that he had after God restored his fortunes], and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.’ (42:15)

You could almost hear the original audience gasp at this point – giving daughters part of the inheritance was unheard of. Women were simply not part of the equation, as we say nowadays. But then Job has had his attention directed at all those parts of the creation that, until now, have not been ‘part of the equation’ for him. He emerged a changed man.

The book of Job has a hard message, but it is not a message we can afford to ignore, especially if we want to bear witness in a world where the likes of Monty Python and Richard Dawkins very vocally remind us of things we like to sweep under the carpet. But as we confront these mysteries, we should remember how the incarnate Son of God learnt that the same Father who sustained him throughout his earthly life was also the Father who forsook him in his darkest hour – ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ We have alongside us as a high priest who knows intimately the universe in which we live.

Let’s pray. Father, teach us how to worship you as the Creator of *all* creation. Amen.