**Sermon Sunday 17th October 2021 Trinity 20 by Rev’d Graham Phillips**

Job 38.1-7, 34-end

Mark 10.35-45

When I was 16 I applied for an army scholarship. If awarded the scholarship, I would be committing myself to joining the army as an officer in exchange for a payment of £250 per annum towards my school fees - I was at a boarding school. It meant going for an afternoon of interviews at a very imposing building in London. Initially I had five individual interviews with senior officers and an austere head teacher in a huge barn of a room with portrait paintings of previous generals. Then the tables were pushed together into a semicircle and I was placed in the centre. Each one of the interviewers then asked me a question. One, two, three, four, five and then back to the president.

“Now Graham the final question, “ said the President. I visibly relaxed. “You have met each of us in turn, and I’m sure you understand that an army officer has got to have a sense of humour. Apart from myself, because I am the president, which one of us has the best sense of humour.”

Stalling for time, I replied, “Oh that’s a difficult question Sir,” and he leant forward across his desk and said, “Yes it’s meant to be.”

Then came an inspiration, which I’m sure came from God, and I replied, “Apart from yourself Sir, because as you say you are the President, who has the most influence in this interview?”

With loud guffaws of laughter I was through and awarded the scholarship.

I wonder how many times you have answered a question with another question? Jesus does it several times in the gospels, and God does it here with Job. Job has had a very difficult time. He lost all his oxen, donkeys, sheep, cattle, camels. Many of his servants and all his sons and daughters were killed. Then Job was afflicted with painful sores all over his body. The wonderful life and excellent health that he had enjoyed had gone. Life was miserable. Three friends come to support him and question him to try and explain what has happened and why. Eventually Job cried out to God and demands that God listens to him.

Have you ever been or are you in this situation now? It is one of the perennial questions that we ask. God why has this happened to me? Why am I in pain? Why am I ill? Why has my beloved died? Why do I experience less now of your provision, of your love? What happened to all my high hopes and promises, why have they all collapsed? My aspirations blown away? Why am I so bereft and lonely? Why have you not intervened and made life better? Why have you allowed these awful things to happen?

Have I not been faithful? Have I not been loving? Have I not kept myself from sin? Have I not served others with all my heart? Have I not loved you Almighty God as well as I am able to? Have I not poured myself out to you and others?

In asking these questions we echo Job’s cries to God. And just like Job, we want a reply, we want a response. When we look at what we are hoping for, we are hoping for some self-justification, some sense of deserving better because of our actions and the way that we have been. Maybe even some sense of an apology from God, an admission that he has got it wrong, that he has been harsh or neglectful. That we did not deserve what has happened to us. That God should intervene and change our circumstances or at the very least should give us an explanation. Something concrete, something definite, upon which we can hang our disappointments, our frustrations, our bitterness, our complaint. Something that makes sense of our position.

But God is God, his ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts. God replies with a series of questions all centred around the natural order.

Look at verse 4 with me:

4 ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

   Tell me, if you have understanding.

5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

   Or who stretched the line upon it?

6 On what were its bases sunk,

   or who laid its cornerstone

7 when the morning stars sang together

   and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

The next 64 verses continue in a similar vein, each verse extolling the wonder and glory of God, each verse going deeper and deeper into the mystery that is God.

Let me read some of the verses that are in between the bookend verses we heard today.

12 ‘Have you commanded the morning since your days began,

    and caused the dawn to know its place,

13 so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,

    and the wicked be shaken out of it?

16 ‘Have you entered into the springs of the sea,

    or walked in the recesses of the deep?

22 ‘Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,

    or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,

23 which I have reserved for the time of trouble,

    for the day of battle and war?

Then there is a reference to stars.

31 ‘Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,

    or loose the cords of Orion?

35 Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go

    and say to you, “Here we are”?

Moving on to the next chapter, chapter 39

39.1 ‘Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

    Do you observe the calving of the deer?

9 ‘Is the wild ox willing to serve you?

    Will it spend the night at your crib?

19 ‘Do you give the horse its might?

    Do you clothe its neck with mane?

27 Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up

    and makes its nest on high?

These questions from God change the dynamic of the relationship with Job. They help him to recognise the enormity, the wonder, the majesty of God. These questions also beckon Job into a relationship with God. They are not hostile or competitive questions, they are not there to subdue Job, they are not closed questions. These questions from God are to help Job get a proper perspective of his status in relation to God.

We are like wise called to engage in questions with God. The questions lead us beyond a theology where everything is black and white, ordered and structured, nicely boxed, placed on the mantelpiece and dusted once a week, into a wondrous colourful moving way of living of continual searching, enquiring, delving, in which we are touching, tasting, experiencing, more and more the wonder that is God.

How difficult that can be. We like to have order, predictability. We want to be able to control the present and the future, to know what is going to happen today and tomorrow. We plan for next week, for next month. We look forward to Remembrance Sunday, Christingle and the Carol Service, Christmas Day lunch with family and friends, turkey and wine. All these things we hope and expect and look for.

But as with Job all of this can dissolve in the twinkling of an eye, be taken away in a moment of grief, of tragedy. Refugees, those fleeing the Taliban, other violence, or natural disasters - these people have all experienced, are experiencing dislocation of body, mind and soul, they know Job’s afflictions for themselves.

I wonder how they respond to God’s questions to Job? I wonder …I wonder whether we are prepared for what may be around the corner? Looking at and reflecting on God’s questions to Job can help us in having a Godly perspective on life. So I encourage you, express your angst, your disappointments to God but then be still and know that he is God. Amen.