

Sermon for Third Sunday before Advent - 10 November 2019

Readings: Job 19, 23-27a,
Psalm 17, 1-9,
Luke 20, 27-38

'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.'

I'm sure that for many of us those words will sound somehow familiar but not quite as we remember them, so let me try a different version - 'I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God'. That is the same part of our reading today from the Book of Job but taken from the King James Bible and I suspect that the reason it sounds familiar is that it was one of the texts from which Handel wrote his oratorio *The Messiah*, and which has become one of the most popular and frequently performed arias within that wonderful and deeply spiritual work often quoted as the foundation of our great British choral music tradition (I might observe in passing that Handel himself was of course what we would now call an economic migrant; would he be allowed in today? I'll leave that for you to think about).

We don't often hear from the Book of Job in our readings but these few sentences are, as the lectionary writers realised, singularly appropriate for today and fit well with our other two readings from Psalm 17 and Luke's gospel. The book of Job is in the form of a series of dialogues, between Job and his so-called friends, between Job and God, and between God and the Devil, in which Job's faith in God is tested by a series of misfortunes. It is more than just a story; it is an argument between those who traditionally thought that when bad things happen, they are the price you pay for your sins, and those who believed that God did not intervene directly in people's lives in that way, and so there was not necessarily any link between suffering and God's role in punishing sin. Although the book was written some hundreds of years before Jesus, and the writer could not have foreseen in any detail how Jesus would appear and change the whole course of the relationship between God and his people, it does show that the way in which the Jewish people understood that relationship was changing, so that when Jesus himself challenged traditional views, when for example, he pointed out that people killed by a collapsing building were no more guilty than those who survived, his listeners were able to understand the point he was making.

Today few people hold the view that suffering is a punishment for our sins. Perhaps now that we are so much more aware of all the suffering that is taking place throughout the world, all the time, for all sorts of reasons, and that so much of it involves people who are clearly innocent, often children and other bystanders, we can no longer think of suffering as a form of divine punishment. But it is also because Jesus made it clear that God is a god of mercy and love, and so whilst much of the suffering of the world is the result of human wilfulness, human refusal to treat all people with love and care, it is not God who is doing this to us; it is those in the world who are motivated by evil, by their own lust for power, or lack of compassion.

Chosen to illustrate this point further, Psalm 17 is an appeal to God from someone who feels that they have been unjustly treated - 'Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry'. The psalmist writes of how he has been faithful to God but that he is now surrounded by deadly enemies. He asks God to hide him under his wings, as a mother bird hides her chicks when threatened (what a beautiful image to describe God's loving care for his people). Like Job, the writer believes that his faith in God, and God's commitment to protect those who do have faith in him, will come together and that justice will be done. To paraphrase Psalm 85; 'Mercy and truth will meet together; righteousness and peace will kiss each other' when God puts right the wrongs done by those who oppress the innocent.

Our final reading, from Luke's gospel, takes us to the end of the individual human story; we have been faithful to God like the psalmist, and hopefully God has looked after us, but what happens then? Luke tells a story of how Jesus is tested by the Sadducees on this question, a story also told in Mark and Matthew. The Sadducees were a group within the Jewish faith who took a hard-line, almost a fundamentalist view, that the only laws to be obeyed were those written by Moses, as opposed to the Pharisees, who accepted that some laws came from tradition as well as from later written sources. That is why Pharisees did believe in some form of afterlife, but the Sadducees did not. So the Sadducees who question Jesus use an example drawn from the written law that a man should marry the widow of his dead brother so that his property will continue to be held within the family, and they take this example to a ridiculous length, expecting Jesus to be unable to answer the question, stuck as they are on the literal interpretation of the law.

What Jesus does is to explain that what happens on earth is nothing like what happens in heaven. Thankfully, we don't have to worry about property rights up there, or about complicated relationships, so the issue of who is married to whom doesn't matter. Whatever form the resurrection takes, it will be very different from our earthly lives. Jesus says that we become, not angels, but like angels in that we cannot die again and that we are somehow living with God, along with all the other faithful who will be there as well, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead because we are no longer dead but living a new life. We are not resurrected to relive another worldly life; it is not re-incarnation. We are raised to a new life, in a new and different body, and we leave the old one behind for good. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians (and another well-known piece from Handel's Messiah) 'We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.'

So there we have three readings that should encourage us to go out into the world with confidence and hope, and on this particular Sunday, when we remember those who have died in the great wars of recent history, they should help us to think about how our faith supports us, as it supported them, to deal with those dark places in which we sometimes find ourselves. True, today, here, we are unlikely to find ourselves living daily with the threat of violent death, but there are many other ways in which we can feel, like Job, that life hasn't dealt us a fair hand; our finances, our relationships or our health, for example. When we feel like that, it is all too easy to let self-pity take hold of us and just sit in the corner and feel miserable. But please, don't do that! Job was stripped of all he had but he held on to his faith - I know that my Redeemer lives and that I shall see God. What a wonderful hope that is! We believe that Christ came down and gave his life freely for us. We believe that he too rose from the dead and now lives in the heavenly kingdom to which we may hope to be admitted, to remain there with Jesus and with God.

We are living, if not in actual war, certainly in difficult and uncertain times. We don't know what the future holds for ourselves, for our friends and families, for our country, and probably most of us have problems of our own that confuse and darken our thoughts. I certainly do, yet after I read those lines from Job, and listened to Handel's setting of them (which we will play for you in a moment), I really felt that God was walking with me, as He walks with all of us, if we just raise our eyes from the ground and walk boldly and confidently, knowing that our Redeemer lives, and that we shall indeed see our God.

Amen