

**I spoke of what I do not understand**  
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**Third Sunday after Trinity, 21/6/15**

We don't get Job very often on a Sunday. But it is a superb book, and has some of the best language anywhere in the Bible. We only get today's extract once every three years, and then only if we've picked this particular alternative. So let's take as much advantage as possible of the opportunity to have a closer look.

The book is fiction, not history. It was composed by a master storyteller who used rhetoric, repetition, poetry and drama to create his effects. (I say 'his'. We have absolutely no idea who wrote it. There are some similarities to certain ancient folk-tales, and several other contemporary Middle-Eastern cultures have similar accounts of people whose faith was severely tested. But for all practical purposes we know nothing.)

The story is relatively simple. Job lives in a far-away country where the people plough and reap, rear flocks and herds and live well on their produce. Job is very wealthy, but he is also a faithful servant of God. So faithful, in fact, that when God's angels get together to discuss affairs on earth, Job stands out as the most faithful of all men. The Satan (the 'Adversary', the angel whose job is to search the earth for faults that can be punished) tells God that Job is only faithful so that he can earn and keep his riches. If these were taken away, Job would curse God. So God authorises the Satan to destroy everything – flocks and herds, household, servants and children. Job tears his robes in mourning, but remains faithful. The Satan then argues that Job is still faithful because he is protecting himself, so God lets the Satan afflict him with sores all over his body, as a result of which he is thrown out of town and sits on a dung-heap. But he still refuses to curse God, saying that if we accept good things from God, we must accept bad things as well.

Four friends come from other tribes to sympathise and mourn with him, and after seven days' ritual silence they try to find reasons to explain what has happened (such as that Job himself, or his family or servants, have sinned in some way). Job will have none of this. He laments his circumstances but doesn't blame them on others, and still won't curse God. Instead, he questions what God is doing, trying to find him in everything that is going on, but gets no reply. Eventually, having endured, loss, pain and personal humiliation, not to mention having them compounded by inept, inappropriate and inaccurate attempts by his 'friends' to provide rational explanations, Job hears God speaking directly to him.

And what a speech this is! Today we only have the first eleven verses. I'd love to read the whole thing to you, but we haven't got time. Please, after the service, go home and read all of it – Job chapters 38-41 – for yourself. Job has questioned God; now God questions Job in a torrent of magnificent rhetoric. It is quite wonderful, and it brings me straight back to the theme I touched on three weeks ago: the tremendous, awesome, indescribable transcendence of God. Job is challenged. Did he measure the earth? Could he control the ocean? Can he bring day and night, generate a thunderstorm, lead the stars across the heavens, organise the intricate webs of nature, create and subdue wild beasts and monsters?

This is theophany; the revelation of the might and glory of God. And eventually Job answers: 'I know that you can do all these things – I spoke of what I do not understand – I had heard of you but now I see you – I repent in dust and ashes.'

Job could not do any of these things, and nor can we. Despite the millennia of experiment and research since 'Job' was written, we are as powerless as he was. We have a different level of understanding. We know, for example, that a seed does not actually die before it grows. We know about sub-atomic particles and the laws of physics and chemistry. We think we know a great deal, and many people think that because we know (and allegedly understand) so much, we have rationalised God out of existence. God is now merely a sky-fairy for the superstitious. The laws of science and mathematics are sufficient in themselves.

These people forget two things. First: any scientific law or theory is only valid until a better one appears. We can refine and reinterpret observations, but we get no nearer to an overall explanation. Until relatively recently, people knew that the earth was the centre of the universe and the sun went around it. Much more recently the 'Big Bang' theory of the start of the universe has replaced the 'steady state' theory. There is no reason to suppose that this is the ultimate explanation. It is simply the best one so far. Second: we can analyse and explain all we like, but we can't do. We can't control the motion of the planets. True, we can land a spacecraft on a comet, but we can't make a comet. We can't control the sea – storms and tsunamis are evidence of that. We may be able to predict them to some extent, but we can't make them happen. We can't set up a volcano. Even more significantly, we can't create life. We can modify it, using increasingly sophisticated techniques, but at bottom we are merely mimicking what 'nature' does all by itself.

It is impossible to describe the power and glory of God, All we can do is wonder at it, and give him thanks and praise. But to claim that we don't have to, because he doesn't exist, because proper human knowledge and ability is sufficient for everything we need, is unbelievably arrogant, and limiting, and – ultimately – rather sad. It denies our God-given ability to sense that there are things which are greater and more mysterious than our ability to describe them. As God said to Job: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?'

I rather hope that when Richard Dawkins dies he goes to heaven, where he will meet God and find himself saying: 'I know that you can do all these things – I spoke of what I do not understand – I had heard of you but now I see you – I repent in dust and ashes.'