

Last week as we looked at Job we left him in pain and anguish on the corporation rubbish dump wishing he'd never been born or that God would let him die. The depth of his pain cut him off from those around him. Perhaps you have been there or may even be there. Your pain means that even though there are people with you, you are cut off because you alone feel the pain.

However Job wasn't alone he had these three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar with him and the next 23 chapters of the book of Job are taken up with Job's discussions with them. As you see it was a prolonged discussion. Bryson Smith in his Bible study book on Job puts it:

"In a chapter and a half, Job loses everything, but then for the next 30 chapters there is endless soul-searching, grieving, arguing and wondering why. That is so much like life. It can take a five minute phone call to bring your whole life crashing down, but the grieving and confusion can go on for months if not years".

In one sense these chapters are a side show because they do not really advance Job's understanding of why he was suffering. If anything they show us the limits of human ability to understand these things.

However as a by product it gives us some insights into being friends with those who are suffering.

This morning I want to take chapters 4 & 5 as representative of this section of the book and of the thoughts and actions of the three friends of Job.

Then next week I'll take chapter 9 as a representation of Job's response.

In Chapters 1 & 2 Job lost his possessions, his family and finally his health. In Chap 3 he lamented his very birth and life. In between in 2:11 these three friends arrived.

They had come a long way to "sympathise with him and comfort him" but for a week they sat with him and said nothing. They were good friends, very good friends. That was until they began to speak to Job.

Have a look with me at some of the things they said:

4:1-5 – come on Job you been a help and support to so many who have been going through it, time to take your own advice.

4:6 – you are a very good man and your blameless ways have always been your hope....the word but hangs over the whole sentence and then comes crashing through in the next verse,

4:7 but when did the innocent suffer and perish or the upright be destroyed.

The implication of what Eliphaz was saying is there, "you are a good man Job and things have gone well for you but the fact that things are bad now mean that you are not good."

The friends spell this out in stronger and clearer ways later on:

"if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear." (Job 11:14-15)

The friends were convinced that Job's plight was because of his sin.

That was how it happened, 4:8 "As I have observed those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it." Job was reaping bad things so he must have sown bad things. Their view was that God was in control of everything and that he was just, punishing the wicked and rewarding the good. Job was suffering therefore he must have done something bad. You often hear people ask the question, "what have I done to deserve this?" If you were here over the last two weeks you'll know that Job has done nothing. However, Job's friends presumed that he had. They saw him being punished so he must have been doing something wrong. So they appealed to Job to plead with God, 5:8, "But if it were I, I would appeal to God; I would lay my cause before him." That is Eliphaz encouraged Job to plead with God for forgiveness.

However, Job knew he was blameless, that was what God had said of him. So he refused to do what they said and refuted their accusations against him. As they went on and on, for in the next chapters Eliphaz and Bildad have three speeches and Zophar two all saying the same thing, their words rather than bring comfort only irritated Job. What they were saying just wasn't true. No matter how well intentioned they were their words of comfort only cause upset and anger in Job.

So where had they gone wrong?

They believed God is in control and he is. They believed God is good and just and he is. They believed that all suffering was God's punishment for personal sin, which sometimes it is but often it isn't. I have met a number of people who have lost job, family and home because of drunkenness. If someone wrongs me and I refuse to forgive the bitterness damages me and my relationship with that person. Yes in some ways we do reap what we sow. But clearly suffering is not always a result of doing wrong – those who are innocent do suffer. We have seen that over and over again in such difficult cases of child abuse in recent years such as Victoria Climbié and then baby P. Here Job is an example of the innocent sufferer and of course Jesus is the supreme example as we see from 1 Pet 2:22-23, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

Job was suffering not because he had done anything wrong but because he was blameless. That was why Satan was allowed to cause him suffering. These friends had come with a very clear idea of God and Job and what Job needed to do. Job 2:11 says they met together by agreement and as you read their words it is possible to suggest that they marshalled their arguments together before going to see Job. But their view of God was too mechanical, too restrictive. They didn't allow for the work of Satan who wanted Job to suffer simply to destroy his faith. Nor did they allow for that fact that some suffering is innocent suffering. Finally their view was that God punishes here and now and, while in some parts of the Old Testament we do see God bringing disaster on those who stand opposed to his will, we see through the Bible the fact that while there will be a day when evil is judged and punished that day will not come until the end of time as God holds back his punishment until that day to give us time to repent.

These friends were well intentioned very religious men but they had got it wrong and so they didn't help Job in his suffering.

It is a warning to us to be careful when we speak to those who are suffering. Now I'm not suggesting that you take a course in theology before you go and chat to your friend in hospital. I'm simply suggesting we are careful of what we say. We might easily say to someone "I'm sure God will work it out?" or "I'm sure God will bring healing" but are you can you be sure? Zophar in the middle of all he said that was wrong said "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7). He knew that Job couldn't and nor can we. We do not know the mind or will of God and so sometimes we are better off not speaking than saying things that as here will only irritate the suffering person because the words go against what the sufferer knows to be true in their circumstances.

Yes do speak to your friend who is suffering but think about what you say. Don't trot out platitudes or pious words as if somehow they will be a panacea.

But it wasn't just bad theology that these friends got wrong. As we look at it their approach to Job was sadly lacking.

They may have listened in stunned silence to his curses in Chap 3 but after that they don't really seem to have listened to him. They knew what he needed to hear and one after the other told him.

But surely when a friend is suffering they need to be able to speak and for those with them to listen. They don't need pat, pre-prepared answers and they certainly don't need to have their integrity questioned like Job did. They friends seemed more concerned to keep their belief system intact than to help Job.

They didn't listen and they lacked sympathy. They were not able to understand what Job was going through, which was not surprising but it didn't stop them speaking.

James Dobson who wrote many books on parenting is said to have commented, "I used to have four theories on child-rearing and no kids. Now I have four kids and no theories".

There needed to be some understanding of Job, his thoughts, feelings, needs, uncertainties and fears but the thinking and agenda of his friends prevented that.

They didn't listen and seem to have had no sympathy and their actions remind us of two things that we need as we sit and speak with those who are suffering.

1. humility- because we cannot feel someone else's pain we cannot presume to say how they should feel or act. We don't know all the answers to their situation and so should be slow to speak and slow to offer advice. These things require a sense of humility. What we can do in humility is what we saw in our series on friendship a couple of years back. There we saw Jonathan coming to David when he was out in the desert on the run from Saul and Jonathan came to him and, "helped him find strength in God" (1 Sam 23:16) or as we put it "he put David's hand as it were into God's hand." What a contrast with Job's friends. It gives us the pointer to come to our friend in humility acknowledging we don't know what to say and don't have the answers but we can bring them in prayer to God

2. certainty – in all this there were things that Job's friends got right. The main one, which is central to the book of Job, is that God is in control and that he is good and just. If you are suffering today or know someone who is suffering I can't say why and I can't say it will get better. However, I can say that God knows your situation, that he is in control over your situation and that he is good.

A second certainty is that he doesn't just know your suffering he is with you in it, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov 18:24).

There is Jesus who is God who suffered and died yet rose again. God knows what it is like to suffer and he has conquered suffering and death. He is with us in our suffering and he will not abandon us.

These friends don't take Job further in understanding why he was suffering and they didn't bring him the comfort he needed. Perhaps in our situation we can learn from their mistakes and see that we do speak and act wisely as good friends of those who suffer.