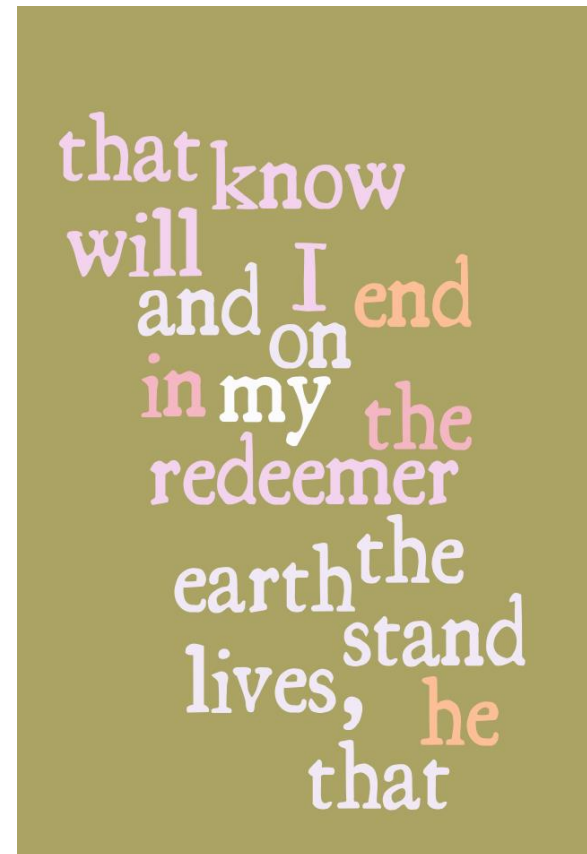


## 28 Reflections on Job



The Rev'd Dr Janet Tollington

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aromatic oil for special uses (Ex.30:24; Ps.45:9) and ‘Horn of antimony’, akin to eyeliner used to beautify ancient queens (2 Kgs.9:30; Jer.4:30). These are very beautiful women, to be regarded as princesses; but Job treats them exactly like their brothers (v.15)! This is a radical statement about gender equality that goes far beyond the provisions of Numbers 27:1-8, which is often regarded as daringly innovative!

There is a ‘happy ever after’ ending as Job lives out a ‘double’ lifespan before he dies in the manner of Abraham (Gen.25:8) and Isaac (Gen.35:29). We’ve come round full circle; but Job has taken us deeper into the realities of the human condition and higher into the wonders of God. Rather like the experience of Jesus on his way from the wilderness to the cross. May our Lenten journey of faith continue on a similar path as we walk the way of Jesus.

### *Prayer*

Gracious God,  
for all your blessings we praise you  
and we rejoice in the knowledge  
that you are a God of mercy,  
for too often we are less like Job  
and more like his friends.

Enlarge our vision  
and strengthen our faith;  
and may our lives proclaim  
the radical truth of your gospel,  
for the sake of Jesus.  
Amen.

**Reflection**

It is easy to overlook this prose epilogue to the book and assume that it simply restores the *status quo* of 1:1-5 before the veracity of God’s claims about Job were put to the test. Let’s not make that mistake.

The narrator gives us another speech by God. This one is directed at Eliphaz and his two friends (Elihu isn’t included); and God is angry with them. They are accused of speaking ‘folly’ (v.8), the word implies a heinous offence that leads God’s people astray (Isa.9:16; 32:6). In contrast Job is described as God’s ‘servant’ who spoke rightly. The ones who had tried to defend God against Job’s accusations are now identified as the ‘wicked’ and commanded to offer propitiatory sacrifices. Their rigid adherence to traditional ‘wisdom’ and unwillingness to open their eyes to see a bigger vision of God is condemned by God.

As God’s servant it appears that Job has already risen up from the ashes and resumed his former position as a righteous mediator for the community (1:5; 29:7ff); and God chooses to show mercy on the friends when Job intercedes for them (1:8, 9).

The restoration of Job is an act of God’s grace not a reward for his integrity. This occurs ‘when’, i.e. after, Job had prayed, not ‘because’; nor in response to prayer. Job is doubly blessed by God in all his material possessions, a sign of the unpredictability of God; and ironically Job’s wider family flock to offer comfort and support (v.11; cf. 19:13-19) – now he no longer needs it!

He is blessed with the same number of children as before (where’s his wife?) but the naming of the daughters is interesting. ‘Turtle dove’ calls to mind the woman in Song of Songs 2:14; ‘Cassia’ an

27: JOB 42:1-6 .....56  
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**Introduction**

This set of 28 reflections and prayers were prepared for Lent 2018 to be sent out to the subscribers of the URC’s Daily Devotions emails. Here they are collected so they can be used by individuals or small groups.

A Biblical reference is given at the start of each reflection. This is best read from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised Edition) or you may find that some of the comments on the text are harder to follow.

We are very grateful to the Rev’d Dr Janet Tollington for her hard work on these reflections. Janet worked for many years as the Old Testament tutor at our Westminster College in Cambridge. Now, in retirement, she continues to serve the Church in a wide range of activities – including supervising students.

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*Andy Braunston  
Coordinator,  
Daily Devotions from the URC*

## 1: Job 1

### **Reflection**

As Lent begins we think of Jesus, at the start of his ministry, being tempted in the wilderness by ‘the devil’ or ‘Satan’; the description depends upon which Gospel and which Bible translation we read. It is easy to think of such a figure as acting in opposition to God; but here at the start of Job we find the same character – the satan – clearly presented as one of the heavenly beings serving God, who does nothing without divine sanction. The Hebrew noun translates as ‘adversary’ or ‘accuser’ and should not be understood as a proper name in this book. The figure functions a bit like the prosecuting counsel in a law court, the one who presents the evidence in support of an accusation that has been made.

In this chapter, we as the readers, are being told that God believes Job to be a completely ‘blameless and upright man’. However, the conversation with the satan raises the question as to whether Job’s integrity is sincere, or motivated solely by the prospect of further blessings from God being received for good behaviour. Is he truly selfless and altruistic, or would Job act differently if life turned sour on him, or disaster struck? So God instructs the satan to put Job to the test.

It is important to recognise that this chapter doesn’t describe actual events but is a literary device designed to get us thinking about our behaviour and motivations; and about the theological problem of evil. God is not capricious and I do not believe in a God who deliberately inflicts (or sanctions) any kind of suffering on a human being.

Job passes his first test with flying colours; but I’m left wondering how I would feel if I lost everything that was precious to me. Material possessions are one thing and perhaps I need to learn to

So we might read, ‘Therefore I reject (my misunderstandings?), and change my mind in humble submission’.

It is always valuable to increase our knowledge **about** God by study and debate; but it is when we engage **with** God that we begin to comprehend who is the source, the guide, and the goal of all that has existence. In worship, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit we have access to the eternal God who, I believe, is waiting to engage with each of us at an ever-deeper level; and to open our eyes. Who knows? What we see may cause us to change our minds!

### **Prayer**

Holy God,  
you have revealed your human face to us in Jesus  
and are present with us through the Spirit.  
Thank you for coming into our lives  
in ways that enable us to see something of your holiness.  
Help us to worship you with reverence,  
with eyes wide open,  
so that we might glimpse more of your grandeur  
and your loving concern for all creation,  
through our praises,  
our heartfelt prayers  
and our rigorous engagement with your word.  
And may we live by what we see,<sup>1</sup> in the name of Christ. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from verse 4 of George Caird’s hymn ‘Not far beyond the sea, nor high’, Rejoice & Sing 318.

27: Job 42:1-6

### **Reflection**

Job breaks his silence and turns to God again; but his tone is different and there's a change in his attitude towards God. Job says nothing about his own situation or demands for justice. Instead he expresses contentment because he has come to a radically new understanding about God and God's purposes.

In this short speech Job reiterates what he had always believed about God's power (v.2); but then he replays two things that God had spoken to him. Verse 3 is virtually identical to 38:2 and verse 4 repeats 38:3b and 40:7b. Job has had time to reflect on these words and now admits that he had been speaking in ignorance most of the time. The things of God are 'too wonderful' for Job, or any human being, to comprehend; and Job is even more aware of this since God has revealed so much more about the scale, complexity, and mystery of creation. In his first response Job conceded his impotence but now he effectively retracts his charges against God as mistaken.

His final words explain what has prompted this change in him; it is his personal encounter with God. Previously he had 'heard' about God. In other words, had learned the traditional doctrines, the deposit of faith that had been handed down and imagined that was all he needed to (or could) know about God. Now, though, he has 'seen' God: God has opened his eyes to realise that humans are not central to God's design and that God's concerns are far wider than our self-centred ones.

This leads him to respond in complete humility before God. The words 'despise myself' and 'repent' in verse 6 don't quite convey what the Hebrew expresses. The first of these verbs most frequently means 'reject' and the second basically means 'change one's mind'.

value these less highly; but the sudden loss of loved ones would be a very different matter. I hope my response would be to turn towards God with honesty, in grief, anger, turmoil, trusting that in God alone would I ultimately find the answers and the loving support I needed – but would I respond like that?

Jesus was willing to embark on a period of self-examination in the wilderness; and as his disciples it is appropriate for us to grapple with some of these difficult questions as we journey through Lent.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God,  
may I be truly thankful  
for all the blessings that are mine  
and never expectant of receiving more.  
Help me to surrender all that I have  
to be used in your service.  
Make me ready to engage in self-examination  
as I follow Jesus on the road to the Cross.  
Amen.

## 2: Job 2

### **Reflection**

For Job life gets even tougher as he contracts a nasty skin disease which covers him from head to toe. He has no idea where it's come from and he's certain he doesn't deserve it. In the ancient world diseases and any kind of suffering were understood as divine punishment for sin; and this book wants to challenge that theology. Again, as readers, we are assured that God knows Job remains 'blameless'.

Job feels like rubbish and goes to sit among the rubbish away from other people. But still Job doesn't rail against God, or sin in any way, even when his wife encourages him to 'curse God, and die'. He refuses to deny the sovereignty of God and God's freedom to act in ways that we cannot understand. He refuses to let go of faith and to live as one alienated from God.

Personally I wish the text expressed Job's reproof to his wife as the speech of 'any foolish person', rather than 'any foolish woman'; but it stems from a community and a time where patriarchy prevailed. Gender is not the issue here but the folly of rejecting God whenever life doesn't go the way we would wish. Job speaks truly when he declares that God is the source of everything, good and bad alike, a truth also expressed in Isaiah 45:7.

Then Job's three friends come to offer him pastoral support for they have heard about his troubles. They are shocked at his appearance and consult together about how to respond and the amazing thing is that they don't go away, fearful that they might catch the same disease. They don't nominate one of them to be their spokesperson leaving the other two free to depart. They don't offer words of comfort, or go straight in with questions to Job about his situation.

amazing that nothing could be more important than being in an ongoing real relationship with this God?

I could never walk away; and I praise God for all that has been revealed in Jesus of God's love for me. I still have many, many questions about God's ways but I rejoice in the knowledge that God will never refuse to listen to them if I have the faith to take them to God in prayer.

### **Prayer**

Thank you, God, for creating me  
and setting me to live in such a wondrous universe.  
Thank you for giving me the freedom to respond, or not,  
to your invitation to live in covenant relationship with you.  
Thank you for showing yourself to me, in Jesus,  
and in all your marvellous acts of creation.  
Thank you for strengthening my faith  
as I grapple with you in a search for truth.  
May my walk of faith be an encouragement to others  
to put their trust in you.  
In the name of Christ, Amen.

26: Job 40:15-41:34

### **Reflection**

These are the last words God addresses to Job. Much has been written about whether the beasts should be understood as a hippopotamus and a crocodile, or mythical creatures; and you are entitled to wonder how these descriptions of powerful beasts contribute to the effectiveness of God's speech. We can agree with George Bernard Shaw who once noted, "If I complain that I am suffering unjustly, it is no answer to say, "Can you make a hippopotamus?"

This is true and yet the author of Job has chosen to end the divine speech in this abrupt way. Job is forced to contemplate Behemoth, one of the creatures made by God, just as God made Job (40:15). It is described in the same way as wisdom as the first of God's creative acts (compare 40:19 with Prov.8:22) and only God can control it. Leviathan was understood as a fearful mythical monster that inhabited the deeps (Job 3:8; Isa.27:1); but through a rhetorical question to Job (41:11) and the following verses, God claims control of it too (see also Ps.74:14).

Is a parallel being made between Job and these wondrous creatures? All are under the control of God and capable of being subdued? And yet God chooses to give Job the freedom to challenge God, to do more than simply admire God's majestic power from afar. Job has the choice to keep silent and turn away from God or to make a response as God had demanded.

Understood in this way all that these verses say to Job is said also to us. They challenge us to make a decision about God. Will we walk away if God hasn't given us the answers we want? Or will we realise that the God who has made Behemoth, Leviathan and us is so

They simply weep and sit alongside him in silence, sharing his misery for a whole week.

It can be so tempting to stay away from someone who is suffering when we feel inadequate and don't know what to say or do. Often, though, our presence and readiness to share someone else's grief is the best response we can make and exactly what is needed as a real expression of love.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, you are the source of all that is and I praise you for all the experiences of life. Help me to remain faithful, whatever befalls me.

Thank you for my friends, especially those who have stuck by me in the tough times and revealed your love to me. Help me to be a loving friend to others, willing to give of my time and my presence in response to their need.

Help me to know when to keep my mouth shut and to recognise that I don't have all the answers, nor the wisdom to understand what the real questions are. Sustain me by your love and let that love flow through me to any who are in need today. Amen.

### 3: Job 3

#### **Reflection**

The prologue has set the scene and now the theological debate can begin; and we get a dramatic outburst from Job expressing his extreme anguish. He wishes he had never been born! The depth of his suffering, his inner conviction that he doesn't deserve it, his bewilderment at what has happened – and so suddenly – all pours out in a torrent of words.

The amazing thing is that Job's tirade is directed at God; but he neither curses God, nor accuses God of causing his suffering. Instead he appeals to God to eradicate the day of his birth from history – to wipe away his life altogether. It is a cry born out of faith in God; but in a God who isn't behaving justly, from Job's perspective.

As he continues to unleash his emotions, Job's words turn to lament and he wishes he was dead, for then he would be at rest in Sheol with all the rich and poor, good and bad, alike who had gone before. (No-one believed in resurrection when this book was written.) As he cries out 'Why?' he starts to align himself with the weak and the oppressed in society, people for whom death comes as a merciful release.

It is easy to see why, at the darkest moments in life someone might imagine that everyone else would be better off if the sufferer hadn't existed, if they hadn't been around to cause pain and sorrow to others. Such feelings are understandable because pain can prevent us from seeing all the positive things that have also been part of life. It can be the same whenever we receive negative criticism, even if only one such point is made alongside much praise and affirmation. It gets out of proportion in our mind and we begin to undervalue ourself; or we wallow in a sense of guilt and become unwilling to do anything, in case we get it wrong.

God hasn't dismissed Job as a fool, nor refused to engage with his accusations. God is taking seriously the fact that justice matters to Job and is leading him towards a resolution of the central issue; a resolution that Job will be able to own for himself because he is a party in reaching it.

Today I can only wait in silence with Job for God to lead me into deeper truth; but I do so in the belief that God knows everything about me (Luke 12:7) and the conviction that nothing can separate me from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39) as I continue walking in the way of Jesus through Lent.

#### **Prayer**

Sovereign God,  
I am humbled when I realise  
that you are interested in all of my concerns,  
be they petty matters  
or ones that have significance for the whole world.  
Thank you for the privilege of prayer  
whereby I can engage with you person to person;  
and help me to know when to speak, when to listen,  
and when I must wait and endure the silence.  
Reassure me of your presence  
and deepen my faith,  
through Jesus Christ, Amen.



25: Job 40:1-14

### **Reflection**

It is as though God pauses for breath and then turns to Job again and demands a response. God doesn't seem to mind that Job has been critical of the 'Almighty'; but insists that Job cannot fall silent now that God has opened his eyes to see the bigger picture of divine activity.

Job, on the other hand, who has never doubted the enormity of God's power, admits his insignificance and his inability to answer God's questions; and replies that he has nothing to say. We should note that Job doesn't admit to wickedness, or to being wrong in his claims that God isn't just.

But God won't accept Job's silence and in words that repeat the opening of chapter 38 challenges Job again. Justice is the point of contention now; and the opening words of v.8 could be translated, 'Will you also frustrate my rights?'. Job has made accusations against God to prove himself innocent but God is not willing to plead guilty as charged!

Amazingly, God invites Job to stand in the divine shoes (so to speak) and to try his hand at exercising justice over the proud, the wicked, the whole world; to exercise the sovereignty that he has accused God of failing to do. In context Job recognises that this is a ridiculous suggestion, way beyond his ability; and I freely admit that it is way beyond mine too!

There is nothing Job can say; he can only wait to discover what God will say or do next. Job's day in court isn't going the way he expected but he is receiving God's full attention.

It is healthy to lament before God in heartfelt ways and to permit anyone who is suffering to do the same. For to paraphrase some words of Peter in John 6, where else can we turn? We may not get the answers we want but we will discover that our cry has been heard by a God who cares about us.

### **Prayer**

Loving God,  
there is so much suffering in this world  
and many people live in despair.  
Draw near to them  
and let them know that their cries are heard.  
Help me to keep a proper perspective  
when things go wrong in my life  
and to trust in your good purposes at all times.  
Amen

4: Job 4: 1-9; 5: 8-9, 17-19

### **Reflection**

Eliphaz feels obliged to speak, to reprove Job for his lament and initially his words are a gentle rebuke to a friend. He then voices one of the doctrines of traditional wisdom, as though this will comfort Job: that an innocent person has never suffered a premature death.

It is hard to imagine that anyone today could believe this, let alone voice such ideas to a friend who is saying they want to die. But sometimes we fail to think about the impact our words will have and, more dangerously, fail to consider whether received wisdom, or long held beliefs, are actually true. As Eliphaz continues his speech he is obliged to concede that Job has never appeared to be a wicked person and deserving of his fate. However, he still can't bring himself to reject the idea that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

It might seem that if God exercised justice in such a neat binary way the world would be a better place; but it only takes a moment's thought to realise that people are neither completely righteous nor totally wicked. It is also evident that corrupt practice can certainly bring material rewards, status and power, while good people are often downtrodden and living in poverty. Life is messy and we often discover unexpected negative consequences follow an initial decision that seemed like a good idea.

If we claim to understand how God's justice works we are deceiving ourselves. Personally, I also find the idea of God's justice being delayed until an 'end time' when some will be saved and others condemned equally unsatisfactory, because I believe that the incarnation demonstrates that God cares about this world and the importance of justice in the here and now. Exactly what justice means and how it is exercised demand serious, ongoing,

problems and our perspective on the world is not a major concern of God! 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' and birds that feed on carrion are part of God's wisdom and deserve God's final word (39:26-30).

These chapters don't suggest that humans don't matter to God – quite the opposite because God has chosen to engage, person to person with Job; but they present a picture of God's activity and concern far wider than we tend to imagine.

I need to be reminded – I am not at the centre of the universe! Nor are you.

### **Prayer**

Wondrous God,  
the universe is filled by your glory  
and I am humbled when I contemplate  
how much more you may still have to reveal  
about your nature and purposes.  
Forgive me when I behave  
as though my concerns are the ones that matter most.  
Forgive us all when we fail to be good stewards of your creation  
and treat it as a possession to be used for human benefit.  
Grant us a better understanding of how all things  
can work together for good for the eternal glory of your name.  
Amen

24: Job 38:1-27, 39-41; 39:1-8, 26-30

### **Reflection**

Astonishingly God responds to Job's demands for an audience and speaks to him. Storm imagery was often associated with theophany in the ancient world; but the translator's choice of 'whirlwind' conveys the idea of God emerging from a calm centre into the storm-tossed chaos of human existence.

However, God's opening words rebuke Job for speaking without knowledge and challenge him to prepare for a robust interrogation. Far from providing any answers to Job's questions, God launches into a series of questions for Job to answer, questions that rapidly reveal how little Job (or any human being) knows about the world around us. None of God's questions relates to issues of justice, suffering, innocence, and wickedness – the topics that exercised Job and his friends. None of God's questions focuses on humanity at all; they are about creation, the cosmos, and the animals. They force Job to expand his focus onto the origins of the world, the depths of the sea, the stars in heaven and the wild creatures that inhabit the land beyond the territories controlled by humans. These poetic chapters are breath taking in their scope and their use of language to enlarge our horizons.

Like Job, we are incapable of answering God's questions; like Job we understand their implication. God is the one with knowledge, who brought all these things into being and who established order in the world, order that accords to a divine plan beyond human comprehension. It becomes clear that God lavishes attention on aspects of creation that are of no interest, or use, to humans (38:25-27) and God's loving care extends to wild beasts that humans regard as threatening (38:39-41). The freedom of the wild ass to roam widely, untamed by humans as a beast of burden (39:5-8), delights God. We are forced to recognise that human obsession with our own

consideration, because circumstances and context have a bearing on it.

Eliphaz rubs salt into Job's wounds by suggesting that he should be happy to receive God's discipline (5:17); and he simply doesn't appreciate how his own blinkered dogmatism is adding to Job's pain.

### **Prayer**

O God, preserve me from thinking  
that I have the answer to someone else's problem.  
Help me to listen,  
to discern what the real needs and questions are,  
before saying anything.  
Help me to be a conduit  
through which someone can draw nearer to God,  
instead of claiming to be God's mouthpiece.  
Grant me wisdom and fill me with compassion  
for all who are in turmoil or any kind of pain.  
Teach me what it means to be a real friend  
as I walk the way of Jesus. Amen

5: Job 6:14-27; 7:16-21

### **Reflection**

Job isn't persuaded and renews his lament, wishing that God will end his life because he isn't sure how much more he can endure without sinning against God. The only point on which Job agrees with Eliphaz is that God is all powerful and free to act in whatever ways God chooses. He denounces his friends for failing him and regards them almost as enemies, even though he has acknowledged God as his tormentor (6:4). The Hebrew of verse 14 is 'broken' and cannot be translated but it is clear that it includes the words *friends* and *loyalty* and probably implies that being loyal to one's friends is the essence of true religion. There is a degree of irony in the way Job asks how he has offended them.

In chapter 7 he turns back to address God and expresses a sympathetic understanding for human beings everywhere who live in misery – something he had failed to understand when his own life was good. He asks God to remember the mortality of humans and then, in anguish, accuses God of persecuting him for no reason. His patience is ended and he demands that God justifies what is happening to him. It would be bad enough if God was ignoring him in his misery; but in Job's eyes it seems as though God is out to get him!

In verse 17 we find one of many allusions to the Psalms that the writer of Job incorporates in these dialogues. Familiar words from Psalm 8 (vv.4-5) which accord a high status to humanity in God's creation and loving purposes, are here parodied to question why God has singled out humanity – and Job in particular – in a relentless, tyrannical way. Job ends up by arguing that even if he had sinned – which he insists he hasn't – what's the point of God constantly watching him, he'll be dead soon and out of God's reach.

need to acknowledge that God chooses how and when to communicate and that there is a possibility that we don't perceive God's response when it is made (33:13-15).

Elihu also reminds us that God is our Maker; that 'God is mighty and does not despise any' (36:5); that God 'does great things that we cannot comprehend' (37:5) and that 'around God is awesome majesty' (37:22). He affirms the mystery of God and urges us to treat God with reverence.

### **Prayer**

Holy God,  
forgive us when we are ageist  
in our consideration of others.  
Help us to look beyond the physical manifestation of years  
to see the person created in your image,  
our brother or sister in Christ.  
May we neither seek, nor give, deference on the basis of age;  
but listen respectfully to all who want to join in our debates,  
hoping that we might discern your voice  
in words of young and old alike.  
Amen.

23: Job 32:1-10; 34:34-37; 37:23-24

### **Reflection**

Chapters 32-37 are a long monologue spoken by Elihu, introduced by a brief explanation of who this young man is and implying that he has been silently observing everything since arriving at the scene with Job's friends.

Elihu is angry; angry at the friends and angry at Job. The friends have failed to answer any of Job's arguments adequately and Job has had the effrontery to question God's justice and power; so Elihu offers himself as the arbiter. In many ways he is a stereotypical 'angry young man' who is 'no respecter of age' and arrogant. Much of what he says engages with the earlier dialogues. Sometimes he quotes directly; sometimes he distorts what was said and displays his own prejudices. He dares to suggest that he can teach Job wisdom, if he'll listen to him (33:33); and he makes a staggering claim that he is able to speak on God's behalf with 'perfect ... knowledge' (36:4).

However, before older readers start saying something like: 'that's the trouble with the young, they think they know it all', or younger readers despair at one of their generation being presented in such a negative way by the author of Job – and some commentators have suggested (wrongly in my opinion) that Elihu is presented as a 'fool' – we do well to heed some important truths about God that are put into Elihu's mouth. We also need to realise that he has been listening carefully; he doesn't enter the debate with a total disregard for what has gone before. How often are we so concerned to make our own point that we fail to listen to what others are saying?

Elihu teaches us that God grants wisdom to humans irrespective of age (32:8-9); we are the ones who foolishly regard age categories as having significance with regard to the things of God. Secondly, we cannot demand an answer from God to any of our questions; we

What I like about Job is the willingness to engage with God head on; and the fact that we see his self-awareness and understanding of the human condition subtly changing as he grapples with all that is happening and keeps asking questions. He hasn't received any answers from God; but that won't stop him believing that God is the only one who can provide them.

### **Prayer**

Eternal God,  
help me to turn to you in every situation,  
seeking to understand more of your nature  
and your purposes.  
Help me to realise that through the honesty of my prayers  
you will bring about change in me;  
and that I cannot influence you to do my will.  
Grant me the courage to keep asking you difficult questions  
and the faith to say 'Your will be done'  
when I don't discern your answers.  
Amen

## 6: Job 8

### *Reflection*

It is now Bildad's turn to speak and, as with the whole cycle of speeches, we need to read each as a separate poem that rarely interacts directly with what has been said previously by Job or one of the other friends. Bildad simply disparages Job's words as nonsense (a great wind) and declares as an incontrovertible truth that God never behaves unjustly. He uses the example of Job's children as evidence of divine retribution at work – surely one of the most tactless sentences ever put into the mouth of a supposed friend of someone who has been bereaved! He goes on to say that if Job is pure and innocent, and he turns to God in prayer, then God will restore him back to his former situation. This, of course, in context is impossible as everything Job had has been annihilated.

So we recognise that it is Bildad who is speaking nonsense; but he appeals to tradition, the wisdom of the ancestors, as though this can never be challenged. He implies that everything about God and God's ways was made known to the wise and that Job needs to learn from these teachers. He doesn't appreciate that Job is fully aware of these traditions, has accepted this teaching in the past, but is now questioning its validity because it doesn't ring true with his experience.

Bildad's final words summarise his view of divine retribution and show that in his blinkered acceptance of this doctrine he has completely missed the point of what is happening to Job. It can be so easy to imagine that we know all that is needed about God, to accept the teaching of scholars, the traditions of the church, the wording of Bible translations that have been handed down and have become familiar to us. We can forget that ours is a living faith and that the Holy Spirit was given to lead us into truth. Greater understanding is surely something we should keep striving towards.

'statement' and to flourish it because he is absolutely confident that it vindicates him.

Job has run out of things to say. He is desolate and no-one is responding; but he isn't cowed before God. He has accused God of many things; but he remains firm in his belief that God exists and that God holds all the power. May we never let go of these truths.

### *Prayer*

God, there are times when you seem hidden  
and it feels as though my prayers fall on deaf ears.  
Help me to remain firm in my faith  
and, like Job, to be persistent in my cries to you.  
Grant me resilience in the face of adversity or injustice;  
and the determination to ensure that 'truth will out'.  
As I walk in the way of Jesus draw near to me, I pray,  
and let me know your presence. In his name, Amen.

22: Job 29:2-6; 30:16-23; 31:5-8, 35-37

### **Reflection**

Job begins to speak again and he sets out his defence over three chapters. In 29 he laments all that he has lost, recalling the high regard in which he used to be held by everyone, when God was his friend (vv.2-6). The lament continues in 30 as Job pathetically sets out his current miserable state. In 31 he demonstrates that his conduct has been exemplary by listing sins of which he has never been guilty; and he swears an oath to this effect. Only 30:20-23 are directly addressed to God; but the whole speech serves to exonerate Job of any charge that might have been alleged against him. At the same time Job's words function as an indictment against God for acting unjustly towards him.

Job's description of his prior life suggests a man who held very high status and 29:12-17 depict the actions of a righteous ruler (as in Ps.72) who delivered justice to the needy without partiality. He thus refutes one of Eliphaz's accusations (22.5-9).

There is a degree of self-justification in what Job says and his proud spirit can still be discerned as he almost belittles those who are now humiliating him (30:1, 5, 12); but the effect is to increase his sense of self-degradation. Other people may be the agents of his torment but Job has no doubt that God is his persecutor. He accuses God of ignoring his cries and of being cruel in turning from being a friend into a foe (vv.20f). There is no suggestion that Job expects an answer anymore; but chapter 30 ends with a summary of his case and a statement that he had expected reward for his virtuous life (v.26).

In chapter 31 Job addresses the 'court'. Both Job and God now stand accused and if God won't respond all Job can do is deny all misconduct. In v.35 he demands for one last time that God appear and that a proper case be conducted. Job is prepared to sign his

New situations also give rise to new questions and we need to be prepared to admit when the old answers are no longer satisfactory in the complexities of life. God's truth may surprise us and make us rethink!

### **Prayer**

Living God,  
help me to be a questioning believer,  
ready to let go of old certainties  
when confronted by their inadequacy.  
Save me from offering trite or tactless responses  
that add to someone's pain;  
and from speaking without first seeking  
someone's own perspective on their situation.  
Holy Spirit,  
lead us into truth  
as more of God's wonder is revealed  
as we walk the way of Jesus. Amen

7: Job 9:1-29; 10:8-13

### **Reflection**

In chapter 9 Job responds by questioning how any mortal can be just before God because God is the creator and a human is insignificant in comparison. He wants a day in court to determine the issue; but also suggests that the idea of a legal contest between God and him is impossible, because God makes the rules and God refuses to reveal the basis on which divine judgment is made. Nonetheless Job protests his innocence: he has not sinned against God. In chapter 10, in strong language, he presents the case he would make against God for condemning him unjustly. He doesn't expect an answer; and indeed he isn't sure that God is even listening to anything he says.

These chapters include important passages about God as creator that reflect both ancient cosmology and understandings of human growth in the womb. They indicate something of the development of these theological concepts; and how this writer challenges simplistic ideas. It was believed that the earth was flat and that it rested on pillars set firmly at the base of the watery 'deep' where chaos monsters dwelt. The bottoms of mountains acted as foundations that provided stability and in the Psalms (46:2-3; 75:3; 93:1) this is all part of God's creative work that can resist hostile forces. Job argues that God also has the power to 'undo' creation as an expression of divine anger, which for all its negativity is a salutary reminder that we should never take the continuing existence of anything, even the cosmos, for granted. Even the promises of God in Genesis that there will never be another 'Flood' recognise that the earth might be finite (Gen.8:22).

The description of God's involvement in the development of a human baby resonates with ideas about the creation of humanity found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (formed from dust – Gen.2:7; moulded like clay - Isa.45:9; and knit together – Ps.139:13) but this is

creative activity; and therefore, not something that any human can hope to possess.

The final verse refers to human 'wisdom', using the word in a different sense. Here it means 'insight' or 'discernment', in contrast to factual information or skills that can be learned. This kind of wisdom can be attained but only as a gift of God, as the outcome of living in right relationship with God. Too frequently the acquisition of mineral deposits has led to human conflict around the world. So let us pray for an increase in human wisdom and commit ourselves to seeking a deeper relationship with God above all else.

### **Prayer**

Eternal God,  
your wisdom underlies all that exists  
and we marvel at the rich resources deep within the earth.  
Grant that the nations of the world  
might learn to use these wisely  
and to turn away from the evils of greed and war.

Help us to grow in wisdom  
as we focus on you;  
and to learn from Jesus  
about the things of real value in life.  
Amen.



## 21: Job 28

### **Reflection**

This chapter is a breath of fresh air after all the words of protestation. It makes no reference to Job, the friends, nor to the issue of divine justice; it is a superb poem about the location of wisdom (vv.12 and 20), as though it was a tangible commodity. It is questioning the source of wisdom, how it can be acquired and who, if anyone can possess it.

The knowledge displayed in this poem about the mineral resources of the world (Israel produces no such metals and stones in any quantity) and the technical skills required to mine them is remarkable. It describes the ingenuity and effort employed by humans to extract these precious things; and the superiority of humankind over the greatest creatures among the birds and animals, which lack such abilities.

The poet contrasts this knowledge and apparent mastery over the physical world with wisdom that still remains elusive. Verses 13-22 catalogue all the places on the earth, under the earth, even in the land of the dead, where our search for wisdom might take us; and implies that this would be a futile pursuit. Nor can wisdom be bought, irrespective of the wealth we may have amassed and be willing to pay for it, declares the poet. It is beyond price. Wisdom is the most desirable thing imaginable and yet it remains inaccessible if we try to gain it through our own endeavours.

The questions of vv.12 and 20 are answered in the concluding stanza: God knows the 'way' to wisdom. God, who created the heavens and the earth, who directs the forces of nature and weather patterns, has established wisdom. The poet is saying that true wisdom is a fundamental principle of order in the universe, a facet of God's

much more detailed, almost 'scientific', with its reference to skin, flesh, bones and sinews. It reveals a God intimately involved in bringing to birth an individual new life with great care, as an act of love; and then preserving that person in being.

We are indeed wonderfully made, each one of us a unique child of God, and we can be confident that God, as our mother, will never forget us (Isa.49:15). I may not understand the ways of God; but I will trust in God's unfailing love.

### **Prayer**

Creator God,  
you brought the cosmos into being  
and you hold all that it contains in being.  
Time and space belong to you;  
and yet you know and care for me,  
small as I am.  
I praise you for my life  
and the grandeur of the universe.

Help me to fulfil my potential  
as your child and to live in ways  
that reflect the wonder of your creative love.  
Amen.

## 8: Job 11

### **Reflection**

The third friend, Zophar, now enters the fray and he introduces the concept of wisdom into the debate saying that Job lacks the wisdom to appreciate that he is not wholly innocent, as he claims. However Zophar misrepresents Job in verse 4, since the Hebrew more accurately reads 'my teaching/doctrine' rather than 'my conduct'. He is accusing him of intellectual arrogance, which is not a stance Job has taken. In any case the prologue has established that God regards Job as innocent, so this is a moot point.

Zophar speaks rather like a hostile witness in a legal trial but his statement that God is actually being lenient towards Job (v.6b) is exceptionally harsh. He adds insult to injury by piously appealing that God would speak and reveal this 'wisdom' to Job, which is exactly what Job wants of God. Zophar continues, presenting himself as God's spokesman, and expounds the limitless extent of God's power in traditional ways culminating in the standard doctrine of retribution. It is as if he believes that he is telling Job something new!

Zophar assumes Job's guilt yet holds out the hope that Job could be restored to his former happy state if he turned towards God and renounced his wicked ways. But Job has always 'feared God' and 'turned away from evil' (1:1) and this hasn't saved him from his current plight. Zophar's rigid beliefs lead him to conclude therefore that there can be no escape for Job.

I hope that I never encounter a 'friend' like Zophar and that I will never speak to anyone in such an unfeeling, superior way.

One thing that his speech reveals, though, is the difference between learned knowledge and wisdom. We can all acquire knowledge and sometimes we focus too heavily on the pursuit of certificates to

Swearing oaths or making vows, are not understood as life and death matters in today's world; and sadly, they are sometimes treated casually. Prenuptial agreements, whereby marriage breakdown is anticipated before the vows have even been taken, are fairly common. Telling lies in court won't be prosecuted as perjury unless the lie was about an issue 'material' to the case. Gone are the days when saying 'my word is my bond' would be accepted as evidence of good faith.

I accept that it can be impossible to keep a promise when relationships have broken down; but let us never make a promise without the sincere intention of fulfilling it. It is a matter of integrity.

### **Prayer**

Faithful God,  
the Bible is full of stories of your promises being fulfilled  
and we know that we can trust you to keep your word.

Help us to consider carefully the costs that will be involved  
before we make any commitment;  
and help us to keep any promises we have made.

May our lives reflect your faithfulness  
as we take a stand for truth in the world. Amen

## 20: Job 27

### **Reflection**

Again, there are difficulties with the text. Verse 1 suggests that Job begins a fresh speech, despite the fact that the book presents him as the speaker of the previous chapter; and the latter half, vv.13-23, sounds like something Zophar might have said. Verse 13 is virtually identical with 20:29, the conclusion of his second speech; and many consider this to be Zophar's third. It repeats ideas put forward by all the friends.

The opening section of this chapter clearly belongs in Job's mouth, although vv.7-10 (which are very reminiscent of Ps.35) interrupt the flow. This is Job's final response to the friends and it is couched in the language of the law court. He makes the strongest possible claim that he is innocent of the alleged wickedness through two solemn oaths, both made in the name of God. He still maintains that God is responsible for all his suffering; but God is also the one who keeps him alive.

Job insists that he is in the right, that his friends have been wrong. All that they have tried to teach him about God's justice has been in error; Job is the one who has things to teach his friends, if only they were willing to listen and learn. It is as though Job is saying to them, 'Look at the evidence in front of your eyes. Why can't you see the truth?'

Through his oaths Job is effectively giving formal notice to God that he is ready to defend himself, whatever the outcome. If Job is wrong and he has sworn falsely in the name of God it would mean automatic death. The stakes couldn't be higher and everything rests on Job's integrity.

demonstrate our learning. We also live in a world where some advocate 'alternative facts' in support of a personal agenda if the truth threatens to undermine their status or power base. Wisdom has little to do with the amount of information stored in our heads, or readily accessible in electronic format through a search engine. Wisdom is about discernment, and about employing true knowledge to fulfil God's purposes. Wisdom is something that can only be received as a gift of God's grace.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God,  
thank you for opportunities to learn  
and for enabling us to access so much information  
about the world and its inhabitants.  
Grant us wisdom to discern truth from falsehood  
and the courage to name falsehood for what it is.

Save us from using our knowledge to belittle others.  
Save us from using eloquent words  
oblivious of the hurt they may cause.  
Give us grace so that all our speaking  
is directed towards building up Christ's kingdom  
and the glory of your name.  
Amen.

9: Job 12:1-4, 13-25; 13:13-19

### **Reflection**

Job responds at length; in fact his speech fills three chapters of text (to 14:22 if you want to read it all) but it will suffice to focus on selected verses today and tomorrow. He addresses the friends as a group with contempt accusing them of speaking as if they were the sole possessors of wisdom. Job laments that he – and everyone else – already ‘knew’ what they have been saying and therefore he, an upright worshipper of God, has become a laughingstock.

He returns again to ideas that God’s wisdom and power can result in the ‘un-doing’ of creation, in the turning upside down of all accepted understandings of justice and proper order in the world. He is arguing that his recent experience, real life, does not accord with the doctrine of divine retribution that his friends held on to. For Job it had become impossible to accept any longer that God behaved justly. Or more accurately Job is admitting that human understandings of ‘justice’ simply don’t apply to God and his theology is being turned upside down.

Job has reached a turning point. He rejects his friends as being useless and demands a day in court face to face with God, even though he no longer has any faith in God’s justice (13:13). He doesn’t think he has any hope but is determined to present his case as he has nothing to lose. He is confident that no-one, not even God, can prove him guilty.

As the chapter ends Job pleads with God to let him know how he has sinned - why is God treating him as an enemy? Job won’t turn away from God; he won’t abandon faith in God’s sovereignty; he can’t quite let go of the idea that God behaves ‘justly’ – if only humans could understand how divine justice operates.

meaning when applied to God as against humanity. The standard for humans is not moral, or any other kind of, perfection; the measure in the Hebrew Bible is conformity to what God requires of us, as set out in the ‘books of the law’.

Just as it is a fallacy to work from human understandings of justice to presume knowledge of how divine justice works, so it is a fallacy to work from an understanding of God’s righteousness to apply the same standard to ourselves. So let’s not beat ourselves up (or judge others!) when we fail to reach perfection; but give thanks that, through Christ, God understands our weakness and accepts our faith as righteousness.

### **Prayer**

God of light,  
your righteousness shines into all creation  
to reveal things as they are.  
Nothing can be hidden from your sight  
and we know that we fall short of our own expectations,  
let alone the standard you require of us as your people.

Yet we rejoice in the knowledge  
that you accept us and love us;  
and have chosen to continue Christ’s mission on earth through us.  
We are dumbfounded by this trust.  
When we stumble, lift us up again,  
that we may continue walking the way of Jesus for your glory. Amen.

## 19: Job 25

### **Reflection**

Chapters 24-26 cause problems for readers and translators alike. Structurally we expect Bildad to speak next, then Job, then Zophar and then Job again – but this third cycle of dialogue isn't complete. In 24:1-12 the Hebrew text consistently reads 'they' as the subject. The NRSV translator is probably correct to interpret this as 'the wicked' in v.2, but in v.5 'they' seem to be the oppressed; and the ambiguity continues in vv.9-12. 24:1 didn't indicate a change of speaker; but vv.13-24 don't ring true in the mouth of Job as they express the opposite of what he has been maintaining.

Chapter 25 is a very short response from Bildad. Has it been curtailed? Are more of his views expressed elsewhere in these chapters? 26:2-4 make sense as Job's response to Bildad but what follows is simply a non-controversial speech about God as creator of the universe. It isn't clear how this contributes to the flow of the debate; and all the friends could have said this as easily as Job.

Scholars offer ingenious solutions to the apparent corruption and dislocation of the text; but none are considered satisfactory. Who knows? Could 'confusion' be a clever device by the author cautioning against arguing round in circles to the point where no-one is clear about what each is saying, or whose views are being rebutted?

Today's focus is on Bildad's speech. He offers an uncontentious description of God's infinite power and sovereignty; but then makes a leap in reasoning to conclude that no 'maggoty' human could be righteous before God. Is he implying that God's majesty equates to divine righteousness and so Job is being ridiculous, almost blasphemous, by claiming to be righteous (or 'blameless', 'innocent') as he has frequently asserted? But 'righteousness' has a different

Grappling with difficult theological questions as they relate to lived experience is part of the discipline of Lent; and it can often lead to a deepening of our faith. But Job reminds us that we will not always get answers to our questions. Jesus has revealed much about God to us; but faith demands that we put our trust in the invisible God who is ultimately beyond all human understanding.

### **Prayer**

Eternal God,  
your wisdom surpasses our understanding  
and your sovereignty encompasses all time and space;  
and yet in Jesus you have shown us your love and compassion  
for each and every one of us.  
Help us to trust you always.

Help us keep on striving to know you better,  
to wrestle with the challenges that life brings to faith.  
Grant us an ability to accept our 'unknowing'  
when there are no easy answers;  
and to continue walking the way of Jesus until journey's end.  
Amen.

## 10: Job 14:1-17

### **Reflection**

This part of Job's speech is more reflective and sombre in tone. It focuses on human mortality and the brevity of a person's life in the grand scale of the universe. Job admits that every human being is 'unclean' in comparison with God but prays that God might at least let someone live out their allotted span in peace. Verses 7-12 are recognised as a short poem that contrasts the inevitability of human death with the possibility of renewal and reinvigoration that follows even the harshest acts of pruning in the case of plant life.

Right until the end of the Old Testament period there was no hope of a meaningful afterlife for humanity. Sheol, an underworld place of shadowy non-existence, beyond the reach of God, was believed to be the destiny of everyone at death. Job wonders why God has ordained things this way and forlornly wishes that, in his case, Sheol might be a place where God granted him temporary protection. But the ludicrous notion of God protecting Job against God's own wrath brings such flights of fancy to an end.

Thoughts such as these, as God's people began to think seriously about God's purposes for humanity and about the bigger problem of evil, may represent the earliest beginnings of a doctrine of resurrection. However it didn't really begin to emerge until later times of persecution under the Greek empire when remaining faithful to God could mean losing one's life. If the faithful were being killed, what was the point of faith if it was hastening the end of 'Israel' and there was nothing beyond? As Christians, we live in hope of resurrection to eternal life through the work of Christ on the cross; but there are countless millions around the world who still struggle with the questions that confront Job without any such hope. Fatalism and despair, or narcissistic self-interest at the expense of

In Jesus we find answers to many of our questions: in him we find a friend who is always ready to meet us in our need and to provide real comfort. In Jesus, we find a teacher who shows us how to live our human life in accordance with God's will and purposes. In the risen Christ, we have a mediator in heaven between God and humanity (1 Tim.2:5) who intercedes on our behalf. Even so there remains mystery about the God who created all things, holds all things in being and will bring all things to fulfilment when time is no more.

### **Prayer**

Holy God,  
we are awestruck by the contemplation of your fullness  
and I confess that part of me is fearful  
of meeting you face to face.

Thank you for Jesus  
who has revealed your human face  
and taught us that we need not be afraid.  
May we always approach you with reverence  
and with confidence  
that it is your 'good pleasure to give (us) the kingdom'.  
Amen

## 18: Job 23

### **Reflection**

Apparently, Job has been able to 'blot out' all that has been said to him. It is as though he is on his own and this soliloquy lets us see how quickly he fluctuates between complete confidence that God would acquit him of all charges, if only he could present his case, and pure terror at the thought that God has already decided he is guilty. Job doesn't seem interested in the restoration of his health or wealth; he is only concerned about his innocence before God.

At the outset, we sense his desire to engage with God, who is so elusive. Job no longer asks God to come and meet him but muses whether he might be able to approach God in the heavenly realm. His hope that God would ultimately act justly hasn't been completely abandoned; but then his doubts resurface. He has no idea where to find God and yet he has an overwhelming sense that God is watching his every move ready to condemn him. What if God cannot be dissuaded from pursuing him? That thought terrifies him and he sinks down into dark despair.

We've reached the core of the book. We're faced by the same questions as its characters and author. How does God exercise justice? Can we ever know the ways of God? Can humans bring influence to bear on God through word or action? Where can we go to meet with God? And would we be crushed by the overwhelming holiness of God at such a meeting?

None of these questions are answered simply by pointing to Jesus, for although in him we see God in human form, we remember that Jesus submitted himself to the will of God (Mk.14:36) and knew what it was to feel forsaken by God (Matt.27:46).

anyone else's situation, are alternative responses to living in a world that seems to lack justice.

Our world urgently needs to hear a message of hope and as disciples of Jesus we have been given an imperative to make known the good news of God; and to live out our faith in ways that proclaim the hope that is in us.

### **Prayer**

God of life,  
fill me with hope  
and grant me a deeper understanding  
of your promises of life eternal.  
Make me sensitive to all those who struggle  
to make sense of what is happening in the world;  
and ready to engage with them  
no matter what kinds of answers they advocate.  
As I follow Jesus  
may my faltering acts of love and expressions of hope  
be transformed by your Spirit  
into a revelation of you and your loving purposes for all creation;  
for in you alone is the world's true hope. Amen.

11: Job 15:1-16

### **Reflection**

Eliphaz can't accept Job's dismissal of all the traditional wisdom that he, Bildad and Zophar have offered and accuses Job of claiming to be wiser than they are. The debate is getting personal as each character becomes more disparaging about what someone else has said. Eliphaz tries to suggest that Job should listen to his 'elders and betters', although there is no suggestion in the text that Job is any younger than he is! He accuses Job of condemning himself out of his own mouth and suggests that no-one could say such irreligious things unless corrupted by sin. Therefore, Job must simply have been concealing his sinfulness and is getting his just deserts.

I am painfully aware of how easy it is to dig one's heels in, to keep repeating exactly the same line of argument; and even to distort the evidence presented by someone else so that it will fit one's own prejudices. Eliphaz doesn't hold back and says many things to preserve his own authority and to diminish Job.

In verse 8 he asks rhetorically whether Job has had the privilege of listening to God in the divine council. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible this privilege is understood to be the context through which prophets receive their messages from God; but this is not the meaning here. Eliphaz is implying that Job seems to regard himself as akin to wisdom personified (Prov.8:30) alongside God at creation. As readers, we recognise the irony of the question. The prologue to the book is set in the divine council; and if Job had been able to listen in, all of his questions would have been answered before he even thought of asking them.

As the book unfolds, though, we progress with Job on his journey of discovery about God, about himself, about the universe, about

came to reveal. Our communities contain many who are impoverished, hungry, thirsty, prey to loan sharks; many who are homeless while luxury housing continues to be built as investment property for the rich.

Many churches and individual Christians do great work to alleviate suffering and to support the needy as they strive for social justice; and we thank God for this faithful Christian witness. But is there more that we should be doing, in the name of Christ, to transform the structures of society that perpetuate such 'wickedness' in our world?

### **Prayer**

Righteous God,  
I have so much to learn as I travel through Lent,  
about you and your ways,  
and about me and my shortcomings.  
Preserve me from speaking falsely  
and from turning away from anyone in need  
when I have an opportunity to act kindly.

Fill me with righteous anger  
towards the structural injustices that exist  
and teach me what is possible for me to accomplish  
in the work of transforming this world into your kingdom.  
Amen.



17: Job 22:1-11, 21-30

### **Reflection**

This will be the last we hear from Eliphaz; but he has no intention of being conciliatory towards Job. Quite the opposite, he is downright hostile. Although he ends (vv.21ff) with an appeal to Job to return to God, suggesting that he can still be rehabilitated, this is only on the basis that Job renounces both his wickedness and his wealth (totally ignoring the fact that Job has already lost all of this!).

Eliphaz talks about God's transcendence and self-sufficiency, unaffected by human behaviour. Since God is just, he argues, the harsh treatment that Job has received from God must result from a life of exceptional wickedness. Any protestations of innocence by Job only compound his wickedness in Eliphaz's eyes. Having reached this monstrous (and seriously flawed!) conclusion Eliphaz then sets about 'manufacturing' the facts to support his theory.

The speed at which Eliphaz has turned from being a true friend arriving to comfort someone who has suffered misfortune, into a false accuser is frightening. It is a salutary reminder of the fragility of bonds of friendship, unless we work at strengthening them through loving words and deeds.

The spurious crimes of which Eliphaz accuses Job are all social ones forbidden in the law codes and frequently denounced by the prophets. Crushing the arm of an orphan goes even further as this represents an act of gratuitous violence that would deprive the victim of any hope of independence. It is akin to some of the horrors of modern slavery that are in our news.

However these verses remind me of the parable in Matthew 25:31ff about sheep and goats. In Jesus's mouth these words challenge us to examine our own social responsibility against the kingdom values he

cherished religious traditions, and even about the sincerity of friendship. Hopefully we are making similar discoveries for ourselves.

I'm sure that God could reveal everything about everything to us without our needing to ask questions; but then we would never know what it means to learn, or have the joy of that 'eureka' moment when we solve a tricky problem. The idea of growing in faith would also be meaningless. So I will thank God for everything that bewilders me and keep pursuing answers to all my questions.

### **Prayer**

Amazing God,  
grant me an inquisitive mind  
and an unwillingness to accept easy answers  
that fail to engage with the heart of a matter.  
Preserve me from belittling others, though,  
in my search for truth.  
May I delight in all that you reveal to me  
through the unexpected and even unwanted events of my life  
as I journey through Lent on the road to the Cross.  
Amen

12: Job 16:1-17; 17:1

### **Reflection**

The opening verse of chapter 17 expresses the essence of Job's long monologue through both these chapters. He has nothing else to say and piles up a range of metaphors to convey how he feels about the harsh ways in which God has treated him. His 'comforters' have brought him no comfort either. The speech indicates someone worn down by all that's happened to him and all that's been said as well. He's hit rock bottom and he's lost the will to fight back any more. There's just the hint of a cry to God for pity; but it's couched in the language of a defeated man pleading with an assailant to stop hitting him anymore.

Yet Job still maintains his innocence (16:17) and, although the final verses of chapter 16 are virtually impossible to translate from the Hebrew with any certainty about their meaning, it appears that Job believes that God knows this too. Nonetheless he's lost hope and is waiting for death.

It would be quite easy for someone as desperate as Job to admit they were in the wrong and deserved to be 'punished'. It might make the friends feel better; but it would do nothing to alleviate the pain and suffering being endured. Nor is it possible for Job to admit he is 'guilty as charged' because he has absolutely no idea what it is that he has allegedly done. Consequently, there is no obvious way out of the impasse where Job and his friends find themselves.

I don't know what it is to be in such despair; but I am aware that others will have known such times in their lives and some will be struggling in its depths today. It can strike anyone; and some of those living on our streets, or in prison, are in its grip, believing themselves friendless too.

issue that really matters to us. Nothing will be gained by winning an argument if the consequence is a breakdown in relationships and disunity in the church.

Big theological issues frequently threaten to cause division in the church; and they should never be avoided for the sake of an easy life! When the heat rises let us pray for a Job among us who can help us continue the discussion from a different angle in a measured, Christ like, way.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God,  
look upon us kindly  
when we struggle with some of the issues  
on which Christians disagree.  
Help us in the pursuit of your truth;  
and teach us how to debate  
with personal integrity and mature faith.

Forgive us for past failures  
and any breakdowns in relationships;  
and lead us in ways that lead to reconciliation.  
In the name of Christ, Amen.

16: Job 21:1-16, 22-26, 34

### **Reflection**

This response from Job engages directly with all that his friends have argued. He makes no direct reference to his own situation but instead points to the evidence of human experience that totally refutes what they have said. He is quite calm as he demolishes Zophar's most recent words by describing the prosperous, joyful life enjoyed by some who are wicked. He doesn't suggest that this is true for all but in vv.23-26 simply points to the fact that the fate of the wicked seems to be arbitrary, from a human perspective. The only certainty that they all share is death. God isn't being just in Job's eyes and he ironically asks if the friends presume the right to teach God 'his own business' (v.22). The chapter ends as Job dismisses all their arguments as false.

In the cycle of dialogues, we have seen the relationships between Job and his friends becoming strained, we have recognised many heated words being spoken and seen intransigence on all sides. Here, although Job begins by taunting his friends, saying that the only 'comfort' they can offer is to keep their mouths shut, Job is the one who sees the need to calm things down.

He has the 'wisdom' to behave differently. He de-personalises the debate. He could have continued to assert that everything said by the friends about the fate of the wicked was irrelevant because he was innocent; but this line of argument was leading nowhere. So he changes direction. I think this affirms what the prologue attested: Job is an upright man who 'feared God'.

It is the sign of a mature faith when a Christian is able to steer a debate in a way that offers the hope of constructive dialogue and a good resolution that everyone can live with. This may mean stepping back from what seems like a position of strength when discussing an

Let us be mindful that we can never fully know why someone is their current circumstances; and that their own attempts to explain it may be flawed. Let us be mindful of offering 'solutions' when we have no idea what the real problem is. Let us commit, though, to walking beside anyone in despair as a rock on which they can lean for rest, as a shield to protect them from further harm, and as a sign that they are not alone.

### **Prayer**

Compassionate God,  
draw near to any who are in despair  
and lift them out from their darkness.  
Grant them a vision of fresh possibilities  
and the hope of new life.  
Bring them to a point  
where they can contemplate the future  
as an adventure to be enjoyed.  
May we, and all your people,  
be ready to act as trusty companions along the way.  
In the name of Christ, Amen.

## 13: Job 18

### **Reflection**

Bildad has no fresh insights to contribute to the debate; but he clearly feels the need to say something. Perhaps he likes the sound of his own voice, or is unwilling to let others appear 'wiser' than him. He directs a few impatient words at Job, almost implying that he is destabilising the order of the universe by his ranting.

Then Bildad sets about describing the fate of the wicked through a series of graphic images. He doesn't actually accuse Job of being wicked and his words are little different from ideas expressed throughout the book of Proverbs – standard wisdom traditions. However he refers to skin disease, the destruction of houses, the death of descendants, all things which have been part of Job's recent experience; and it is as if Bildad is saying: 'If the cap fits wear it'. The worst part of this speech is that it contains no possibility of redemption for anyone who is penitent.

The availability of God's forgiveness for all who turn away from sin is central to our Christian faith and a call to repentance is a regular feature in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. The whole of scripture reveals God blessing humanity, inviting us into a loving relationship with God, calling us back when we stray from good pathways, and coming to find us when we lose our way. God never turns away from us; and the times when we feel totally alienated from God are when we are looking in the wrong places, or when God refuses to confirm to our fixed expectations and so we simply don't recognise God's presence in our lives.

Bildad's words reflect someone who has both lost sight of the nature of God and has no compassion towards a fellow human being who is suffering. He speaks with a misplaced confidence in his own wisdom and effectively condemns Job, his friend, to death.

the idea of torment in hell, which probably derives from the ancient practice of burning rubbish in a valley outside the city).

Job isn't mentioned in the body of the poem but it picks up on many words and images used by Job in earlier chapters to describe how God is treating him. Zophar applies them to express God's response to the wicked and so makes clear that he regards Job as among them. Let us never try to claim that we are merely engaging in a theoretical discussion when, in truth, we are directing an attack at the other party.

### **Prayer**

God of truth,  
human language is able to express much truth  
through images and metaphor;  
but help me to see how false and hurtful it can also be  
when thoughtlessly used.  
Preserve me from using words deceitfully,  
or from throwing back at others  
words that they have uttered in the heat of the moment.

May I treasure the beauty of language  
and use it always with the intention  
of making known the gospel of Christ  
in richer, engaging ways. Amen.

## 15: Job 20

### *Reflection*

It is Zophar's turn again. He's greatly agitated by the way Job is trying to undermine everything that Zophar believes by his arguments; and his rhetorical question to Job in v.4 is almost contemptuous. This begins a poem that divides neatly into three sections.

In the first he argues that although the wicked might seem to prosper, their success is only short lived and they suffer a premature death. Not only does human experience suggest that this is false – history records many unsavoury characters who have lived to a ripe old age - but more dangerously Zophar's words can seem to imply that an early death is the consequence of wickedness. This is the conclusion of a simplistic understanding of a doctrine of divine retribution; and it should be vehemently rejected.

The second section (vv.12-19, 20-23) is full of metaphors about eating. It suggests that wickedness, depicted as ill-gained riches, might taste sweet but it is like a poison within. The latter verses change the metaphor to argue that the insatiable greed of the wicked results in there being a general shortage of resources, which brings its own end to their prosperity. Can we relate these words to the ways in which the developed world has raped the earth of its mineral resources at the expense of the poor? Do we recognise the ecological problems which face us as a consequence of our greed? Zophar suggests that God's wrath will finally fill the stomachs of the wicked.

The poem concludes with violent images of how God's wrath might be experienced including a graphic description of a mortal wound received in battle and a more supernatural picture of being consumed by an unquenchable fire (an image often used to portray

I am reminded of an old adage: If you cannot say anything good, then say nothing. Bildad would have done well to heed this; but let us remember that Jesus came to proclaim good news to the world. We have something good to speak into every situation – that there is a way back to God for anyone who wants it irrespective of how they arrived in a place of darkness.

### *Prayer*

God of forgiveness,  
have mercy on me  
for the times when I have considered someone else  
to be unworthy of your love.  
Save me from being judgmental,  
or from weighing others against standards set by me.  
Renew me by your Spirit  
and may all that I say and do this day  
reflect your gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. Amen.

## 14: Job 19

### *Reflection*

In this speech by Job two very well-known sayings appear; both of which are difficult to understand in their context. We all know what 'escaped by the skin of my teeth' (v.20) means, even though we are well aware that teeth do not have any skin! Job has been describing how isolated he has become, how everyone recoils from his presence; and so this can hardly be an expression of relief that his life has been preserved. More probably it implies just how close to death he feels himself to be.

Thanks to Handel's oratorio *Messiah* the words of v.25 are widely associated with the resurrection of Christ and many suggest that vv.25-27 are the earliest expression in the Hebrew Bible of the hope of an afterlife. This seems highly improbable in light of the frequency with which this book has already rejected the possibility of any return from the realm of the dead.

The Hebrew text of this section is notoriously difficult to translate, as indicated by the copious footnotes offered in many Bibles. The Revised English Bible offers an alternative reading: 'But I know that my vindicator lives and that he will rise last to speak in court; I shall discern my witness standing at my side and see my defending counsel, even God himself, whom I shall see with my own eyes, I myself and no other'. This wording accords with Job's desire to have his day in court, to present his defense, in the firm belief that he would then be exonerated of all charges. Even so it is quite remarkable that Job can imagine God speaking on his behalf since Job consistently claims that God is his accuser. Added to this Job regards God as the only one with the authority to pass judgment despite the fact that he also argues that God is behaving unjustly. So we end up with the bizarre picture of God performing every possible role in this imagined courtroom.

Bizarre? Yes. However, when we reach the end of Lent we will encounter God as the accused put to death on the Cross, as the vindicator who passes judgment on the 'principalities and powers' of this world, and as the risen Christ. Faith in God cannot always be expressed in simple, straightforward language!

### *Prayer*

Holy God,  
words fail me when I try to explain who you are  
and how you behave in the world.

Forgive me when I tie myself in knots  
in the foolish belief that I can encapsulate  
the wonder of you in nice neat doctrines.

Continue to surprise me  
as you reveal ever more facets of your amazing love;  
and grant that my life,  
rather than my inadequate words,  
may be a true reflection of your glory.  
Amen