

More useful resources from <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/>

Signs of promise

I always think February's a bit of a funny month! The new year, with its sense of a new start and forward movement, is well and truly over but spring hasn't yet sprung, although we see promising signs here and there. In my urban garden that promise comes in the form of deep red hellebore buds against the overnight snow; for others that promise looks like the first calf and early lambs.

February, with its blue skies and sunshine seemingly alternating with snow, wind and lashing rain, is a helpful reminder that life never moves in a straight line between fixed points! Today's reading from Job and the accompanying reflection from Fr Rob Taylerson remind us that whatever challenges we face, and however those around us respond, God is always present with us.

Whatever the challenges and opportunities of this week, go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

louise.davis@arthurrankcentre.org.uk

Being a compassionate presence

Bible reading: Job 6:1-13 (RSV)

Then Job answered:

'O that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea; therefore my words have been rash. For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me. Does the wild ass bray when he has grass, or the ox low over his fodder? Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt, or is there any taste in the slime of the purslane? My appetite refuses to touch them; they are as food that is loathsome to me.

'O that I might have my request, and that God would grant my desire; that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off! This would be my consolation; I would even exult in pain unsparing; for I have not denied the words of the Holy One. What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient? Is my strength the strength of stones, or is my flesh bronze? In truth I have no help in me, and any resource is driven from me.'

Reflection

Poor Job! He has lost all his possessions, his family members have tragically died and he has been covered in sores and pain. Yet he struggles to stay good and upright in the face of desolation. The sentiment he proclaims and tries to hold on to is, 'The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:21). His wife, who has had enough of it all, is unsympathetic and tells him he's daft because he doesn't give way to cursing God in anger (Job 2:9). Poor Job! Then three 'friends' arrive, not that they bring any comfort. In his desolation Job curses the day of his birth (Job 3:1-26).

In response the first friend, Eliphaz, shows an attitude that is so common (Job 4:1-5:27). The logic of his argument is:

1. If you are good then you will prosper, from which follows...
2. If you are prosperous then you have been good, from which follows...
3. If you are not prosperous, you have been bad!

We read Job's response in our passage for this week. Can it help us make sense of the circumstances in which we currently find ourselves? What does it tell us about the Christian response to others, about our self-perception and attitudes, about redemption?

Here are we in February 2021, a year of pandemic behind us. In 2020 we thought we had seen unimaginable horrors and traumas, then in this January the hospitals became fuller than ever, the death rates rose higher, and new more dangerous strains of virus were creeping through our land. Political uncertainty has added to pandemic. Shops and other businesses are failing. The working-through of Brexit brings anxieties and uncertainties to add to those of the pandemic; goods we've ordered now don't arrive when expected.

We, perhaps, have a sense of not only isolating as individuals, but also being a nation in increasing isolation. 'Captain Tom'-like resilience so easily drains from the human spirit. The way in which we feel that we have been drained may vary, as our energy is sapped in a variety of ways according to our circumstances, but the sense of running on empty is widespread. How do you feel this at present?

Yet Job, even in his drained state, even when God seems deaf to his pleas, continues to trust, even at his wit's end.

Prayer

Loving God,
you call us to be present with those who are in pain,
as you call others to be present with us in our pain.
As we continue to live through this experience of pandemic,
may we take comfort from Job's story,
knowing that you walk with us.

Amen.

Response

As the UK COVID-19 death toll and infections continue to rise, we know that behind these numbers are individuals, families and communities – many of them the rural communities in which we work and minister – who are living through almost unbearable pain and grief.

Who in your community needs your compassionate presence today? What might that look like, given our current COVID restrictions? But many of us are also grieving and in pain, and it's as important that we seek out the support that we need as it is that we extend it to others.

How might you find the compassionate presence you need today? Who could you phone, text or go for a walk with?

Further reading and reflection

What can we do and what might help us, and others? During the pandemic I've done more reading than usual. One helpful multi-volume book has been Gregory the Great's reflections on the book of Job and Christian life (*Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*). Another has been Pope Francis's pandemic reflections, *Let Us Dream*.

Towards the end of our text from Job, he talks about what his strength is not. He says, 'Is my strength the strength of stones, or is my flesh bronze?' Gregory the Great suggests that the quality of stones we must avoid is 'hardness'. To me it seems 'Mrs Job' has sadly gone down this hardness route. Empathy and compassion do become more difficult when we're struggling. Gregory suggests the quality of bronze we must avoid is 'being an automatic loud response when struck' (like a gong). To me Eliphaz is sounding off in such a way. Let's instead ask for Job's 'not strength' in our own lives. Today make a commitment simply to compassion and empathy – to real listening to family and friends.

Job's speeches are on the borders of questioning whether life is now 'worth it'. Pope Francis has good imagery to help when we feel this way. Francis pictures our Christian life as a river which, when it is blocked in the direction it was going, overflows its original banks and takes new and unplanned directions. He counsels discernment from our own recent experience. How, and in what direction has the river of my Christian life been blocked and then overflowed? Pray the following question: 'In your being blocked and subsequent overflow is God offering new directions for your Christian life?'

At the beginning of our text of Job he says, 'O that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea;'. Gregory sees Jesus as the one who ultimately 'weighs' our lives. Not only sins, but also misfortunes are weighed, and the scales are of mercy as well as justice. Christ's own sacrifice also totally shifts the scales' balance. Gregory challenges us to use the weight of current misfortune to trigger compunction for our sin and deeper thanksgiving awareness of Christ's redemption. Pray with confidence, 'Lord, you lift every burden from our backs. Let me be aware of both my burden of sin and of current misfortunes. Let me know and rejoice even more in your compassionate love and the freedom you bring.'

Revd Rob Taylerson, priest in the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham and Arthur Rank Centre trustee