

The way to the dwelling of light

Beware! Do not turn to iniquity;
because of that you have been tried by affliction.
See, God is exalted in his power;
who is a teacher like him?
Who has prescribed for him his way,
or who can say, 'You have done wrong'?
Remember to extol his work,
of which mortals have sung (Job 36.21-24)

So declares the pious Elihu in one of the most poetic, and challenging, books in the Bible. He is seeking to defend the righteousness of God and extol divine greatness, in a speech containing many beautiful passages with which few believers would argue. There is no reason to doubt Elihu's sincerity; and yet he turns out to be profoundly wrong.

Much has been written about the book of Job, with various perspectives on what it conveys about the problem of suffering and the justice of God. Christian writers sometimes link the situation of Job with that of Jesus. However the story touches on how humans relate not only to God but also to one another.

Job finds himself alienated both from the God he has trusted and from his community. His social status has changed. What is more, his own hardship has sensitised him in a new way to the plight of the poor and exploited, who have been pushed to the margins of society, and prompted him to question what he has previously taken for granted. The worldview which he once held does not fit with the reality he has witnessed and experienced.

This does not go down well with his friends and acquaintances, and he is accused of undermining religion, of 'doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God' (Job 15.4). But Job will not back down, even when he comes under intense pressure to conform. In the gospels, Jesus faces even harsher criticism, being accused of being demon-possessed and blasphemous, yet holds his ground, pointing to the evidence that he is doing the work of the Father in healing and freeing those in need.

In today's world, too, it is all too easy to confuse the understandable human wish for security and order with devotion to God. But at certain moments, this can be difficult to sustain, and one may recognise that one's previous model of how the world works is inadequate. For example, if one discovers oneself or a close relative to be lesbian, gay or bisexual, it can jolt one into rethinking what had previously been taken for granted. Other people may deny the possibility of any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality, or insist that same-sex attraction must result from wilful wickedness or dreadful trauma. While some congregations are supportive, others can leave members feeling abandoned and excluded as they seek to make sense of their feelings and observations on sexuality, grapple with the many facets of Scripture and tradition and decide what use to make of their capacities.

Few people come to faith entirely on their own, and most of us owe a debt of gratitude to the communities through which we have come to hear the good news and grow in understanding and appreciation of God's work. Yet there are times when it may be important to seek the truth as best we can, not only for our own spiritual health but also for the sake of those around us. By the goodness of the Holy Spirit, questioning can lead to a deeper and more mature faith.

At the end of the book of Job, God ends his silence, revealing a universe which is far more wonderful and complex than his pious worshippers had imagined, a reality which perhaps cannot be fully encompassed by a religious system or formula which is designed to fit the limits of human understanding. This is not to say that humankind should not try to reflect on or talk about God's ways – far from it. But some measure of humility and openness is called for.

Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.
"Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,
that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home? (Job 38.17-20)

Through Jesus' perseverance, despite his painful sense of isolation at times from fellow-humans and even the heavenly Father, the ultimate power of death has been undermined and the way to the dwelling of light opened to humankind. He is our companion in our journey of faith. Amidst the perplexity and conflict we may face, the love that has embraced us will not let us go.

Savitri Hensman