The Spanish Inquisition

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Reading: Job 19: 23-27

One of the most famous comedy sketches in the history of British television depicts two of the Monty Python team having a bit of an argument when one complains, ‘I didn't expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition’; whereupon a fifteenth-century Spanish cardinal appears and announces, grandly, ‘Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!’ The cardinal then enumerates the Inquisition’s chief weapons, which are surprise, fear, ruthless efficiency, an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope, although he and his fellow cardinals keep forgetting what these weapons are and how many there are of them. They also produce incongruous methods of torture, including a dish-drying rack, soft cushions, and, finally and notoriously, the comfy chair.

There’s two things going on in the sketch: there’s an outer story about ham-fisted inquisitors and their diabolical acting, amplified by catch phrases and ridiculous clothes; and there’s an inner story about the sophisticated and ruthless methods of the historical Inquisition and its apparent absurdity translated into twentieth-century Britain, which together offer a riotous parody of extreme religion and the practice of torture. The juxtaposition of the two makes the sketch so hilarious that it’s become a cult classic.

The biblical character Job didn’t expect the Spanish Inquisition either. But the book of Job has the same structure as the celebrated Monty Python sketch. There’s an outer folk tale about an innocent, God-fearing man. This man gets in the middle of a heavenly dispute between God and Satan, nobly refuses to curse God for the many disasters that befall him, and is consequently restored to a fortune greater than his original state. The message of this story is that human suffering comes about because God is allowing Satan to test humans to see what we’re made of – to see if our faith survives when God no longer seems to be blessing us. But inside this story there’s another, longer, much more complex and sophisticated account of Job’s debate with his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, which offers no explanation for Job’s sufferings, eventually implies God’s own grief over human travails, and in which Job seriously challenges God’s purposes and ways while still remaining faithful.

What these outer and inner stories offer us is a microcosm of the Old Testament as a whole. On the outside is a story of Israel and God, where what we seem to get is a view that God has made a covenant with Israel, and if Israel remains faithful, God will keep Israel in prosperity, and Israel’s trials and struggles are due either to Israel’s own unfaithfulness or to God’s testing and refining Israel’s faith. On the inside is a much more searching and complex story, in which there’s grief, setback and trouble, and it’s not always clear whether these are tests or punishments, or if indeed God is at least as dismayed by them as Israel is, and where Israel regularly asks ‘Oh God, why?’ and ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’ – but always within a deeper relationship of trust and hope.

These two stories, the outer and inner story, represent two ways to believe. The first is a kind of transaction. It says, more or less, I’m going to calculate that God’s offering me a good deal, in which I provide earthly faithfulness and God offers eternal blessedness. God remains distant and unfathomable, and it’s never clear what’s really in it for God; but so long as I can train my desires, control my impatience, and be content to leave a good few questions unanswered, I can call myself a believer. The second kind of faith, the inner story, is very different. It’s more like a love that will not let you go. It’s a regular, in some cases constant debate and wondering and dialogue and pondering that lives with anomalies and paradoxes but still draws you in to a vortex of desire and a whirlwind of mystery. It’s not simple or dull but it’s always absorbing and vital. I wonder whether
your faith most resembles the outer story of conviction, or the inner story of the whirlwind. Or perhaps it’s a mixture of the two.

In both the outer and inner versions of his story, Job experiences three levels of suffering. First, he experiences catastrophic deprivation of property, tragic loss of loved ones, and profound physical agony. Second, he finds himself totally isolated: not only does he have no court of appeal to resort to, no cosmic justice system from which to seek redress – but to compound that he has no true companionship. It’s true that his three friends sit with him for seven days and nights because they see his suffering is so great – but after that they’re mainly concerned to prove his arguments wrong, not genuinely to walk with him through the heart of darkness. And third, he’s stripped of any ultimate hope, because it seems even God is against him, to the extent of having apparently colluded in his sufferings. If the Spanish Inquisition had the draining rack, the soft cushions and the comfy chair, Job experiences the agony of pain, the loneliness of utter isolation, and the extinction of hope. Three levels of torture – a torture so extreme that it would almost be funny if it weren’t so utterly tragic.

The poignancy of the book of Job is that, while his sufferings are portrayed with an almost cartoon extremity, these three kinds of suffering are something we can almost all relate to. We can all recall or imagine what it means to be in terrible pain, or know heart-wrenching bereavement, or lose all our money or possessions. We can all understand, or in some cases perhaps know all too well, the sense of profound isolation, even abandonment, that wondering if we really have any genuine friends and fear that deep down we’re alone in a cruel world. And we can all recognise that tremor that runs through our whole body when we feel, for moments or perhaps extended periods, that there’s no hope, that even God must be against us, that our ultimate destiny is bleak. And if we haven’t touched on such despair ourselves, we need only put ourselves in the shoes of the people of Syria right now.

And here’s the wonder of the book of Job. Deep in the heart of the book, right at the centre of the inner wrestling and wondering and struggling and despairing, comes like a shaft of light from heaven these most extraordinary words. ‘I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.’ From the deepest, deepest place of agony come the truest, most wondrous and perhaps most inspiring words in the whole of scripture.

What I want you to see is how succinctly and comprehensively these short sentences address the three levels of suffering that Job is experiencing. We saw that Job experienced grievous loss and horrendous pain. Here he proclaims, ‘After my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.’ In other words the utter destruction of his physical possessions, relationship and his very body is real and total: but he will see salvation not in some disembodied ethereal paradise, but in his very flesh. This is a statement of the most profound faith that God will restore him in flesh and blood, that all that time and chance have whittled and snatched away will be returned with interest and transformed into beauty. ‘In my flesh I shall see God’: feel the force of that. It’s a visceral, visible, vivid transformation. This isn’t a metaphor: it’s belief and trust in a salvation that takes earthly shape.

Then we saw Job underwent total isolation, from justice and companionship. But this proclamation changes all that. ‘I know that my Redeemer lives,’ he says. The word redeemer in the Old Testament usually refers to the next of kin, whose responsibility it is to buy out debts, rescue one from slavery or avenge a terrible crime. It’s the lack of any such person that makes Job so isolated in this story. Hence the power of this ecstatic declaration: ‘I know that my Redeemer lives.’ Job declares that he has a redeemer after all, and that God is that redeemer. He goes on to say, ‘In my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side.’ In other words, for all the doubt and distrust that God was against him, or at least had left him alone to suffer and die, he realises that when he sees God, God will be on his side, taking his cause, in solidarity with him till the end of time and beyond. He’s had a glimpse of ultimate eternal reality, and in that vision God is right there, saying, gently, ‘I’m by your side.’
And lastly we saw, as the third layer of suffering, Job’s whole hope extinguished. Yet here he says, ‘My eyes shall behold God, and not another.’ You can take this two ways. Throughout the book of Job there’s plenty of conviction that God is control, but a lot of hesitation about whether God’s power is ultimately a benevolent force. But there’s also a shadowy and malign character called Satan, and there’s a lingering anxiety that maybe Satan, not God, will win the argument and have the last word. Here Job leaves us in no doubt. ‘My eyes shall behold God, and not another.’ In the end, after the whirlwind and confusion and mystery has subsided, there’s just God.

It turns out just about the whole of the good news of Christianity is in this short Old Testament declaration. There is hope and ultimate purpose. That hope is lodged in a personal redeemer. That redeemer is by our side forever. And we shall experience that salvation in our own earthly flesh. It’s not a promise simply to take away pain and distress. It’s a promise that God’s redemption will offer companionship and solidarity that transcends suffering.

And this promise arises not in the calm detachment of the outer story but in the midst of the whirlwind and chaos of the inner turmoil. That makes it even more remarkable, and even more reliable. It’s not a glib answer; it’s an absorbed discovery.

You’d almost think we didn’t need the New Testament. But see this one last thing. What Jesus does is to inhabit the story of Job. Jesus is the human being that experiences the agony of pain, the horror of abandonment, and, on the cross, the total loss of hope. He is the Redeemer. He lives. At the last he will stand upon the earth. After our skin has been destroyed, then in our flesh we shall see him, and not another, on our side. In his incarnation Jesus moves from the outer story of assurance to the inner story of dismay, to share our confusion and despair and take us with him to a place of trust and hope. He faces the ultimate inquisition. And he meets us on the other side of agony, where the two stories become one.