

Order of Service, October 3rd 2021

The Truth Search

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 3rd October 2021. Our theme today is *The Truth Search* and we are beginning a short series on the wisdom book called Job. Each service includes a short reading from that book and also a thematically related New Testament text. To get the most from the series, you might like to be reading Job a few chapters at a time. If you're up for that, you might like to get as far as chapter 17 by this time next week. If not, the sermons will still, I hope, make good sense! For the moment, let's be still and prepare ourselves for worship.

Call to Worship

17 Though the fig-tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the sheepfold
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour.
19 The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.

(Habakkuk 3)

Wherever we are in life, we proclaim the honour of our God in our opening hymn.

Hymn (BPW 36) **Come, Worship God who is Worthy of Honour**

Come, worship God who is worthy of honour,
enter his presence with thanks and a song!
He is the rock of his people's salvation,
to whom our jubilant praises belong.

Ruled by his might are the heights of the mountains,
held in his hands are the depths of the earth;
his is the sea, his the land, for he made them,
King above all gods, who gave us our birth.

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture;
he is our maker, and to him we pray.
Gladly we kneel in obedience before him;
great is the God whom we worship this day!

Now let us listen, for God speaks among us,
open our hearts and receive what he says:
peace be to all who remember his goodness,
trust in his word and rejoice in his ways!

Prayer of Praise and Confession (from Guigo the Carthusian)

Lord how much juice you can squeeze from a single grape!
How much water you can draw from a single well!
How great a fire you can kindle from a tiny spark!
How great a tree you can grow from a tiny seed!

My soul is so dry that by itself it cannot pray;
Yet you can squeeze from it the juice of a thousand prayers.
My soul is so parched that by itself it cannot love;
Yet you can draw from it boundless love for you and for my neighbour.
My soul is so cold that by itself it has no joy;
Yet you can light the fire of heavenly joy within me.
My soul is so feeble that by itself it has no faith;
Yet by your power my faith grows to a great height.

Thank you for prayer, for love, for joy, for faith;
Let me always be prayerful, loving, joyful, faithful.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Well now, we want many things in life, but our next song encourages us to want Christ's reign in us more than anything else. Can you make that your one request?

Songs (WT 342) **Over All The Earth**

Over all the earth
You reign on high;
Every mountain stream,
Every sunset sky,
But my one request,
Lord, my only aim
Is that You'd reign in me again.

Chorus

*Lord, reign in me,
Reign in Your power
Over all my dreams.
In my darkest hour
You are the Lord
Of all I am,
So won't You reign in me again?*

Verse 2

Over every thought,
Over every word
May my life reflect
The beauty of my Lord
'Cause You mean more to me
Than any earthly thing,
So won't You reign in me again?

Chorus x 2

*Lord, reign in me,
Reign in Your power
Over all my dreams.
In my darkest hour
You are the Lord
Of all I am,
So won't You reign in me again?*

Won't You reign in me again? X 2

Song (WT 238) **Jesus, Name Above All Names**

Jesus, name above all names,
Beautiful Saviour, glorious Lord.
Emmanuel, God is with us.
Blessed Redeemer, Living word.

Offering

Let's remember the joy of giving.

Lord, for all your gifts of creation and grace, we give you our thanks. Please accept the gifts we offer and use them to bring your light and life into our world. Amen.

And our prayers of intercession today are led by Cynthia Baker.

Prayers of Intercession

O Lord, our God,

You are love, living and dancing through creation.

You are light, challenging and purifying our hearts.

You are peace, deep and unfathomable, working through and beyond all pain and conflict.

We praise you for the gift of life itself;

We praise you for our fragile and beautiful planet;

We praise you for the richness and variety of different races and cultures;

We praise you for human love and laughter;

We praise you for the sheer fun of celebration.

Use us now as channels of blessing for those in need:

For victims of famine in so many parts of our world;

For victims of conflict, especially in Afghanistan;

For victims of hatred, prejudice and injustice;

For those who are ill or depressed, the lonely and those longing to be alone; and for those who have lost all hope of finding a home or finding work.

Lastly we pray for ourselves. Help us all to be mindful of the words we speak which may be hurtful or judgemental. May love and kindness be our watch words, remembering when we leave this place: that is when our service truly begins. Amen

Many thanks, Cynthia, for those prayers. We sing now the song *Oceans*, which explores how God might lead us beyond what is comfortable and familiar and ask us to trust him in a new and unknown place.

Song Oceans

Verse 1

You call me out upon the waters,

The great unknown where feet may fail,

And there I find You in the mystery;

In oceans deep my faith will stand.

Chorus

*And I will call upon Your name,
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise.
My soul will rest in Your embrace,
For I am Yours and You are mine.*

Verse 2

Your grace abounds in deepest waters,
Your sovereign hand will be my guide;
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me -
You've never failed and You won't start now.

Chorus

Interlude

Bridge x 3

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders,
Let me walk upon the waters.
Wherever You would call me,
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Saviour.

Chorus x 2

Let's hear our Bible readings from Job and from Galatians.

Bible Readings

Job 6: 14 – 30

¹⁴ 'Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.

¹⁵ But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams,
as the streams that overflow

- 16 when darkened by thawing ice
and swollen with melting snow,
- 17 but that stop flowing in the dry season,
and in the heat vanish from their channels.
- 18 Caravans turn aside from their routes;
they go off into the wasteland and perish.
- 19 The caravans of Tema look for water,
the travelling merchants of Sheba look in hope.
- 20 They are distressed, because they had been confident;
they arrive there, only to be disappointed.
- 21 Now you too have proved to be of no help;
you see something dreadful and are afraid.
- 22 Have I ever said, "Give something on my behalf,
pay a ransom for me from your wealth,
- 23 deliver me from the hand of the enemy,
rescue me from the clutches of the ruthless"?
- 24 'Teach me, and I will be quiet;
show me where I have been wrong.
- 25 How painful are honest words!
But what do your arguments prove?
- 26 Do you mean to correct what I say,
and treat my desperate words as wind?
- 27 You would even cast lots for the fatherless
and barter away your friend.
- 28 'But now be so kind as to look at me.
Would I lie to your face?
- 29 Relent, do not be unjust;
reconsider, for my integrity is at stake.
- 30 Is there any wickedness on my lips?
Can my mouth not discern malice?

Galatians 2: 1 – 14

Paul accepted by the apostles

2 Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. **2** I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. **3** Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. **4** This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. **5** We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

6 As for those who were held in high esteem – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favouritism – they added nothing to my message. **7** On the contrary, they recognised that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. **8** For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. **9** James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. **10** All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

Paul opposes Cephas

11 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. **12** For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. **13** The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'

And now may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

The Truth Search

Part 1: Models of Reality

My friend Barbara and I were having a conversation about scientific truth. An educational psychologist, she said she had once been confused because she had applied two different models to the same situation, and each had helped her to successfully advise the people involved, yet the two models were inconsistent with each other. Her then husband, a scientist, said, well physicists use two different models to understand the behaviour of light: waves and particles. They can't both be literally true, yet they both help to describe the way light behaves.

Well, I suggested that the human search for truth proceeds by devising models to describe reality. Each model is a useful approximation to reality, but will in time be replaced with a more accurate version. So any knowledge we have, in any field, remains only an approximate model of reality.

Could this even be said about the religious search for truth? Perhaps elaborate religious ideas, with official beliefs and mandated patterns of worship and behaviour, may also be regarded as approximate models of spiritual reality.

One of the simple models dealt with in the book of Job was this:

*Good things happen to good people;
bad things happen to bad people.*

You reap what you sow. Job begins with its eponymous protagonist as a supreme example of this model of reality. He is blameless and upright; he fears God and shuns evil. He has seven sons and three daughters; seven thousand sheep; three thousand camels; five hundred yoke of oxen; five hundred donkeys; and numerous servants. See how God has blessed him for his righteousness! He is the greatest

man among all the peoples of the East. He is exceptionally pious, to the extent of making offerings *just in case* his children might have sinned at a party.

Good things happen to good people. At the start of chapter 1, Job fits the model perfectly. He's an exceptionally good man, so he has an exceptionally good life.

*Good things happen to good people;
bad things happen to bad people.*

This model is arguably a useful approximation to reality. If you pay attention to spirituality and morality and live an upright Christian life, you will tend to be healthier and happier. You may not always get what you want, but you will, generally speaking, be able to enjoy having enough; and even when times are hard, you will be able to draw upon both inner resilience and community support. You will indeed, generally feel a sense of blessing in your life.

But of course we all know the model is only an approximation to reality; an oversimplification. If it were literally always true, then the most blameless people on the planet today must include Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. Without wishing to cast aspersions on those two gentlemen, we know that possessing great wealth is actually no proof of being a good person. And most of us know the opposite too: bad things do happen to good people; to people like Jeremiah and Jesus; Stephen and Paul; Perpetua and Felicity; and people you have known in your life.

The book of Job tests a simple model of reality to the point of destruction. Job, a very righteous man, experiences excessive misfortune.

Part 2: Modes of Expression

Job expresses its thoughts in two principal genres: dramatic tales and poetic dialogue. The manner in which Job's experiences unfold in chapter 1 is reminiscent of a Greek play.

His children are feasting. The oxen and donkeys are taken by raiders, says a servant, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.

While he was still speaking another messenger comes. The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants; and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.

While he was still speaking another messenger comes; the camels have been swept away in a raiding party.

While he was still speaking another messenger comes: your children have died in a freak desert storm that flattened the house where they were partying; and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!

The repetition signals the dramatised form. No doubt Job is inspired by the calamities of a real individual, but the presentation of the first two chapters, and of the final chapter, is stylised and simplified for dramatic effect. The meat of the book continues in 35 chapters of subtle poetic dialogue: an extended reflection recreating the conversations between Job and his infamous comforters Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar; and with the more astute Elihu. The poetry is subtle, profound and illuminating.

Within the opening theatre of the first two chapters, we get a portrayal of God which most modern people would find quite unrecognisable. God is presented as boasting to Satan about his servant Job, who is then used as a pawn in some philosophical game or experiment between God and Satan. It's a dramatisation of the court of heaven, more akin to a medieval mystery play than an accurate description of God's character or methods.

So we are reminded how important it is to consider the **genre** when we interpret the Bible. Is this text a poem, a history, a letter, an apocalypse, a biography or what? For example, we don't read the poetry of the penultimate chapters of Job, which are very much about God and the natural world, as a scientific textbook.

Part 3: Methods of exploration

When Isaac Newton expressed his three laws of gravity, they were a model of reality that described very accurately the motion of bodies on Earth, and even the motion of planets in the heavens. In the NIV, Job 38:33 asks,

*Do you know the Laws of the Heavens?
Can you set God's dominion over the earth?*

Most translations have something more like the NRSV which asks:

*Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?*

That's almost literally what Newton was trying to do - to know the ordinances of heaven and then establish that they were followed on the Earth! Except Newton's model turned out to be only an approximation to reality. As you may know, Einstein's theories of General and Special Relativity provide a more accurate model of the movements of heavenly bodies. When satnavs were being set up, developers first of all applied Newton's model of reality to do the maths which tracked positions on Earth via signals from satellites. They were significantly wrong. They needed a better model. They paid a lot of money to a Cambridge scientist who very easily applied Einstein's more accurate model to good effect.

So science sticks with a model whilst it works well enough, but scientists observe, experiment and experience reality. In the light of real experience, they find better and better models to describe reality more accurately.

Now, I don't think Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar were bad people. In their defence, they **do** come to visit their stricken friend. And then they have the forbearance to say **nothing** for a whole week. And then they **listen** awhile as Job describes his misery. He wishes for his birthday to be written out of the calendar; expresses his unending turmoil, grief and bitterness of soul; and questions the meaning of a life in which God has hedged him in, as he puts it.

Difficulties come when the friends finally speak. The first is Eliphaz, and the problem is simple. He sticks with the model: *Good things happen to good people; bad things happen to bad people*. Eliphaz expresses many fine thoughts. God thwarts the plans of the crafty. He piously asks, 'Can a mortal be more righteous than God; who are we in his sight?' He speaks of the discipline of the Lord Almighty. But he asserts the old model explicitly:

Who, being innocent, has ever perished?

Where were the upright ever destroyed?

So Eliphaz applies the old model and draws the conclusion it requires. Job **must** have sinned and so been the cause of his own lamentable downfall. And so to our reading...

Job is replying to Eliphaz. Verse 14 says:

*Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.*

Kindness, loyalty and love are expressed here by the wonderful Hebrew word *hesed*... It is often given as a key characteristic of God, and in older translations was rendered as 'lovingkindness', a word that I like.

In 1 Samuel 20: 14-15 Jonathan says to his beloved friend David:

*But show me unfailing kindness like the Lord's kindness as long as I live, so that I
may not be killed, and do not ever cut off your kindness from my family.*

Jonathan desires that his loving friendship with David reflects God's *hesed* - his undeserved and perpetual lovingkindness for his people. That's what friends do. They don't follow a theory or apply a theological model; they stick with their friend, and in their loyalty they express the *hesed* of God - the lovingkindness which is at the heart of his character.

Now what Job is saying to Eliphaz is this: his lack of lovingkindness for his friend is actually a dereliction of his spirituality... to withhold kindness from a friend in need is to abandon a proper reverence for Almighty God. Eliphaz chooses a model over the expression of God's actual lovingkindness. He had an opportunity to embody the lovingkindness Job so desperately needed, but he prefers to reach for a theory.

So Job compares his friend to the ephemeral wadis of the desert - streams which might flow in the spring but vanish in the summer. He, Job, is like a caravan in the desert, looking for water, but failing to find it, and so veering into the wilderness to perish. His friend is like that failing stream - he might have saved Job's life simply by

listening and staying with him and loving him; but he has stuck with his official and approximate model of reality. *Good things happen to good people; bad things happen to bad people.* You must have been bad.

And so Job pleads in verse 28 for Eliphaz to look him in the eye; to sit with him face to face. Will he be so kind as to do that? Can he, regardless of his theology, spirituality, theory or model, just stop and look him in the eye? Face to face, man to man... It's a plea for a real connection with a real person in a time of crisis. It's a plea for a different kind of truth - a personal truth expressed through loyalty. Would I, Job, lie to your face Eliphaz? Can you not sense the truth deep within me? I, a real person, your beloved friend, have faced great misfortune, and yet I am not guilty of some hidden sin...

Conclusion

In the search for spiritual truth, the Bible is our guide. It contains numerous rich and wonderful ways of looking at life, and all of it is useful at various times and in various places. Its different theological models are inspired and full of insight, but, like all models, even some of the Bible's may need refining in the light of honest experience. That process happens within the biblical canon itself. Consider Matthew 7: 38 & 39:

*'You have heard that it was said,
"Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth."
But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.
If anyone slaps you on the right cheek,
turn to them the other cheek also.'*

Jesus refines the old model, deepens it, and gives a more accurate model for his followers to use.

Galatians 2 shows how demanding it can be to move from one model to another; to make, what's sometimes called, a paradigm shift. The model of the Law has been superseded by the model of grace. Cephas - that is Peter - had been operating in grace and eating with Gentiles. Now, under pressure from James and representatives of the earlier model, he draws back from that liberated practice.

Perhaps for us, the simplest model of faith lies in 1 John's assertion that *God is love*. Have we then arrived at the final expression of truth; is our searching at an end? Well, I could ask, what, exactly **is** Love? I might wonder indeed, **who**, exactly is God? What does the Greek word for love mean? I might wonder about the grammar of English and Greek in making such a strange identification between the divinity and a moral quality.

But I think we will be doing pretty well if we learn to sit with a friend in trouble, to look them in the eye, to hear their laments and complaints, and to prefer loyal loving-kindness to any formulaic response. In bearing with a person, we express truth very closely. We sense perhaps the nature of truth itself. We may even call off the search.

Even Jesus, called 'the Truth' in John's gospel, refused to answer the question, what is truth, preferring to show truth by remaining loyal to his people and loving them to the end, even through the experience of the cross.

We sing our closing hymn, *Be thou my vision*. May God be our best thought, our wisdom, our armour, our riches, our heart, our sun and our vision...

Hymn (BPW 521) **Be Thou My Vision**

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be Thou my battle Shield, Sword for the fight;
Be Thou my Dignity, Thou my Delight;
Thou my soul's Shelter, Thou my high Tower:
Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

High King of Heaven, my victory won,
May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.