

At first glance it's not obvious why these two passages have been connected in the lectionary. Except that both of them deal with the in house difficulties of our faith - I would have said of being Christian but Job is about 500 years earlier. Difficulties not because of attacks from people outside it - that's always happened from its beginnings to the present day - not the own goals either the damage done by fellow believers - they're not new either - the problems raised by our two readings are part and parcel of being Christian. There's some comfort in this. If we sometimes find being Christian is hard work it might be the difficulties that are built into it. It seems to ask so much of us - the rich young ruler - whilst giving so little in return - so Job says 'How I wish I knew where to find God, how to go where He is.'

Difficulties about how to live it, and difficulties of experience,

We're going to start with the gospel - the man (RYR) comes up to Jesus, 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life? The conversation goes on - he is a good devout man who's come to Jesus to check he's got everything covered for eternal life. And He's done pretty well. Jesus looks at him and loves him and says, 'You lack one thing.' His heart must have leaped - I can manage one more thing, I knew I was almost there...but this is Jesus he's talking to and the answers He gives don't always seem to fit the question you think you've asked Him so what happens is an unpicking of what lay behind the question and a refashioning of it.

There is only one thing you need, but that thing is everything. It's your possessions that possess you, not the other way round so you must leave them behind and do some good with them. You're looking for insurance not eternal life, but it's not about self preservation it's a relationship, it's not a reward to be earned, a grade to be reached, an exam to be passed - it's a person to say yes to, a community/ kingdom/ church to be part of.

Jesus is asking a great deal of him, possessions, security, status, familiarity. He is being invited to step through the looking glass and see things as Jesus does. All that he has relied on - the good things he has done - have become a barrier between himself and God, himself and others.

The one thing you need to do is rethink everything you thought you knew, give up those things you've relied on. It will be hard but you'll be able to follow me.

It's a lot to ask. Follow Jesus - well yes to Him, but look who else he'll be mixing with - it probably didn't look that good a deal - he'd hoped for a guarantee of heaven rather than an invitation to join a ragbag of exactly the sort of people he'd been trying to avoid. Sainsbury's joke. no wonder he has to go away and think about it. Leave what you've valued and follow me.

Jesus isn't picking on the RYR - us too - leave the things that you rely on, that you've built on that have no place in the Kingdom.

It's a lot to ask, but there are things here we can get a handle on. We can see what Jesus is getting at and why. We may not have the possessions of the RYR and what we have may not have such a hold on us, but we'll have our own set of ideas, hopes, attitudes, habits, longings, day dreams, the internal conversations that are dreams of triumph or self justification which have their claws in us, which we're not specially proud of but we've allowed ourselves to become comfortable with though we know they can't really be a part of our following Jesus.

That's what we have to let go of - we see why. The positive side is that the kingdom Jesus is building has no place for some things - the RYR's possessions, the unworthinesses that we might want to cling on to - because the kingdom He is building is good - it's just and generous and compassionate and everyone is there on the same terms and we want to be part of that. So though we can see the cost to the RYR is grievous and may have to pay our own cost daily we can see why.

If the RYR is going to follow Jesus, to be part of His kingdom and to receive eternal life, then there are some things he can't take with him. And though we may fail frequently it's the only place to live.

Now Job. The background. Whoever wrote Job was using it to explore suffering. More specifically how could God let bad things happen to good people and what could be said in the face of that suffering. The set up - it's written almost as a drama - is that Job - who we know is in God's eyes a good and faithful man - loses everything wealth, health and family very suddenly. Catastrophe, and most of the rest of the book is a conversation between Job and his friends about why it's happened. So in the chapter before our reading Eliphaz has explained that Job's problem is that he is useless and steeped in sin, but 'Now Job make peace with God and stop treating Him like an enemy. If you do then He'll bless you.' This is perhaps tougher love than Job really wanted. And he's not having any of it. He doesn't pretend he's perfect, but he can see no relationship between the level of suffering he is experiencing and anything he's done.

What he wants is to be able to put his case to God v4,5 - but he can't find him. He wants to understand what has happened to him, to see where God is in it but all he finds is His absence. Ps 139:7-12 Job didn't have God looking for him v8,9. And God's silence unnerves him. He knows that God's ways are not the same as his. If what has happened isn't punishment, and it can't be, it could be worse it could be part of a plan - something God has in mind for him, something he doesn't understand and doesn't want, but is powerless to avoid v13-15.

Job is a drama and this is set for dramatic effect, but the experience 'God doesn't seem to be there when I want Him' and the fear 'He'll use me as a plaything' are probably not a million miles from things we've known. They don't have to be triggered by a crisis or a difficulty. It's a common experience to feel God is not there and not listening. In stark contrast to those times when we want to avoid Him and then can't move for reminders that He's interested in who we are and how we are.

God's absence when we want Him, the prayers which we are sure must be within His will that go unanswered, the not getting of explanations when to understand something would make it easier to live with. It's part of our faith as we experience it and it's difficult.

I find this hard to deal with partly because the only responses seem so weak.

There's a passage in John when many of Jesus followers leave Him because what He is saying is too hard, so He asks the twelve disciples, 'And you would you like to leave?'. Peter says, 'Lord to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life.' (Lewis p171?) Job would have gone along with this. God may be hard to find but nobody else will do so Job and we are stuck. There's nowhere else to go.

Another response - stronger but outside our control. When the RYR asked a question Jesus answered his need rather than his understanding. For us too it can sometimes be that where God can be found is not at the other end of the questions we are asking. When mercy and grace come into our life they won't necessarily look religious.

Current favourite Christian book though I'm only two chapters in so it may change.

'I remember a morning about 15 years ago. It was a particularly bad morning, after a particularly bad night. We – my wife and I – had been caught in one of those cyclical rows that reignite every time you think they've come to an exhausted close, because the thing that's wrong won't be left alone, won't stay out of sight if you try to turn away from it. Over and over, between midnight and six, when we finally gave up and got up, we'd helplessly looped from tears, and the aftermath of tears, back into scratch-your-eyes-out, scratch-each-other's-skin-off quarrelling. Intimacy had turned toxic:

We got up, and she went to work. I went to a café and nursed my misery along with a cappuccino. I could not see any way out of sorrow that did not involve some obvious self-deception, some wishful lie about where we'd got to. And then the person serving in the café put on a cassette: Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, the middle movement, the adagio.

If you don't know it, it is a very patient piece of music. It too goes round and round, in its way, essentially playing the same tune again and again, on the clarinet alone and then with the orchestra, clarinet and then orchestra, lifting up the same unhurried lilt of solitary sound, and then backing it with a kind of messageless tenderness in deep waves, when the strings join in. It is not strained in any way. It does not sound as if the music is struggling to lift a weight it can only just manage. Yet at the same time, it is not music that denies anything. It offers a strong, absolutely calm rejoicing, but it does not pretend there is no sorrow. On the contrary, it sounds as if it comes from a world where sorrow is perfectly ordinary, but still there is more to be said.

I had heard it lots of times, but this time it felt to me like news. It said: everything you fear is true. And yet. And yet.

Everything you have done wrong, you have really done wrong. And yet. And yet. The world is wider than you fear it is, wider than the repeating rigmaroles in your mind, and it has this in it, as truly as it contains your unhappiness. Shut up and listen, and let yourself count, just a little bit, on a calm that you do not have to be able to make for yourself, because here it is, freely offered. There is more going on here than what you deserve, or don't deserve. There is this as well. And it played the tune again, with all the cares in the world.

The novelist Richard Powers has written that the Clarinet Concerto sounds the way mercy would sound, and that's exactly how I experienced it in 1997.' Spufford 'Unapologetic'.

The difficulties are still there, the problems still need to be solved, but he's been met.

I know the passages we've looked at are not the whole story, but faith can be demanding, it can be uncomfortable - it's the conviction of things unseen after all - we can feel abandoned when we most need comfort but it does survive because even when we are in the middle of all the messiness and uncertainty of normal human life we can still meet grace and mercy (it's because grace and mercy do appear in normal human life that we have something to say to people who are very nervous about church) and we do persist because it's in listening to and following Christ that we hear the words of life. And nobody else has them.