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Divine Indifference (Job 38. 1-11, 19-21)

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The entrance of Yahweh onto the stage towards the end of Job's story could hardly be more dramatic. It's an electrifying moment which cuts through the apparently interminable debate between Job, his three friends and a fourth protagonist called Elihu.

Up until this point, the central issue for all *these* characters has been to do with questions of justice and explanation. Job has suffered terrible, appalling affliction. Why is this happening? What justifies or explains it? What's its meaning? Why? Why? Why? As we've seen over the past few weeks, Job insists, with increasing intensity, that he's done nothing to *deserve* what has befallen him, and he calls repeatedly on God to give him an account, a reckoning. Implicitly, he's demanding that God justify himself. His friends, on the other hand, take it upon themselves to defend God and convict Job of sin. If they concede Job is innocent, then God must be in the wrong – and that's clearly too blasphemous to contemplate. Notice then, that although the disagreement between Job and his companions is fierce, they're all working with the same basic assumption. Suffering is the kind of thing that requires explanation, and preferably, the assignation of blame. Which makes '*who's to blame?*' the only real question.

But then suddenly, out the whirlwind, Yahweh himself breaks in. He speaks, at last, directly to Job: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? You've been questioning me; well now I'm going to question you, and 'you shall declare to me'. It's an extraordinary moment. Can you feel the hairs on the back of your neck rise up?!

What follows next is a masterful divine refusal to engage with Job on the terms he has demanded. Instead of answering Job's question, Yahweh asks a series of apparently irrelevant counter-questions: 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' He employs biting sarcasm to bring home the point. 'Who determined its measurements – surely you know!' And so on and on, through some of the most extraordinary poetry in the bible. 'Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place ...? ...Have you entered into the springs of the sea ...? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? ... Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? (Job 38. 12, 16, 31; 39. 1)

Yahweh's long speech is an unsparing evocation of Job's insignificance in relation to the cosmic scale of life's generation and sustenance. This is, of course, perfectly true; but it seems unkind to say the least. What are we to make of God's apparently question-begging, even callous response to Job's desperate plight and search for meaning?

I think there's a fair degree of squeamishness in much theological commentary at this point. Even liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez reads a bit as though he feels the need to justify God. What God is responding to, he says, is the impious attempt of Job and his friends to constrain God's freedom according to a moral calculus on human-scale. The creation itself is an act of gratuitous love; God has a plan, says Gutierrez, 'but it is not one that the human mind can grasp'.¹ To my ear, there's something that feels a bit off-key about this – and I wonder if it's to do with still being caught in the expectation of explanation.

Because what seems to be happening in the text is not so much that God *answers* Job's question, but that he *ignores* it. God's response is not an explanation, even one of the 'I have a plan and you're too little to understand it' variety. God just ignores the

¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p.73.

question. There *is* no answer forthcoming. And yet strangely, it's knowing *that* that finally brings Job peace. What heals his sense of affront and meaninglessness is precisely *not* being given an explanation for his suffering.

The significance of this is hard to hold onto – and easily misunderstood – so let me say a bit more. The fact that there's no explanation doesn't mean Job was wrong to ask for one. Job's friends tried to shut him up, to have him bypass his reality in favour of religious orthodoxy, but the narrator of the story doesn't endorse their response and nor does God. At the end of the book God says that his wrath is kindled against these friends because they have not 'spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (Job 42. 7). So God, on this account, is not interested in their easy pieties; he doesn't seek from Job a pseudo-surrender which simply suppresses his angst, grief, anger, and will not risk the dangerous journey of contending with God.

Job must lament, rage, must express his sense of injustice and abandonment. His experience, at one level, does demand an answer ... But an answer doesn't come, and in the end Job is exhausted by his question – he gets to the end of his asking. Finally he falls silent ... as the text has it, 'The words of Job are ended'. (Job 31. 40). And only then does God speak. And maybe it's only then, in that place of utter poverty, that Job will be able to hear anything; only when he's despaired of his quest for an answer will he be empty enough to receive.

And what *is* there to receive? What does God say after all this agony and protest, all Job's wrestling for an account of the meaning of what has befallen him?

God says: 'It's not about you'. God says: 'Get over yourself'. And *there* is Job's redemption. There, utterly paradoxically, he encounters the peace of God which passes all understanding. Because although God won't address Job's *question* on the terms Job sets, God does address *him*. God is present to him, in relationship with him – and

somehow his suffering can be borne in a different way. Somehow he knows who God is for him in a whole different way.

‘I have uttered what I did not understand’, he says, ‘things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear, and I will speak: I will question you, and you declare to me. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you’ (Job 42. 3-5)

Theologian Belden Lane has written a book called *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* which explores how, in the immensity of desert or mountain, we finally can know and embrace our own nothingness, and finally experience how freeing and healing this is. ‘We are saved in the end’, he writes, ‘by the things that ignore us’.²

The Book of Job is extraordinarily subtle. It knows that we can’t go straight to acceptance of our nothingness – except at the cost of our authenticity and so the possibility of real, deepened relationship with God. Our suffering does matter, we do count, and we refuse to protest our pain only at the cost of our integrity. And yet, at the same time, our redemption comes when we get to the end of our protest, when we cease the search for explanation, when we break through to a different sense of how we matter and of our place in the scheme of things.

The ‘why’ question keeps us locked in the smallness, self-obsession and drama of the ego. It is of the nature of the love of God to take us beyond this limited, self-referential self. God’s love is the invitation to know ourselves *not* at the centre of the universe. We are here at all only by the gift of a reality that transcends us, a reality that is not at our beck and call, and ultimately we find peace in this knowledge.

And this, miraculously, is possible even in the extremity of suffering. Dutch Jew, Etty Hillesum, wrote on her way to her death at Auschwitz to a good friend, saying that though she has ‘become marked by suffering for a whole lifetime, ... yet [her experience

² Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.54.

is that] life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good – I have to come back to that’, she says, ‘time and again’. Which means, she goes on, that ‘God is in safe hands with us despite everything’.

The book of Job does not give us an explanation for suffering. It doesn’t seek to justify God or apportion blame. It testifies instead to the possibility of being liberated from the way that suffering turns us in upon ourselves, diminishes and defines us, becomes the limit of our sight. It testifies to the possibility of encountering in the very depths of our suffering the One who draws us, whatever our situation and against all expectation, beyond ourselves into the freedom, and ultimately the inalienable joy, of the grace of life.