

P.S.

IMAGINE that you were allowed to ask God one single question to which you would be given an answer. What would it be?

Would it be a theological point? Your own personal explanation of the atonement, for example? Or how about the 'What about the Chinese?' question: how come so many millions through the centuries have never had the gospel properly preached to them? Or again, were you on the right track with your understanding of the book of Revelation?

But perhaps most likely would be something more personal. Like why a partner died before they reached full age; why you were not given opportunities that seemed 'obvious' to you; or why children have not come into the Truth. I suspect that many of us might end up with an aspect of the questions of suffering and providence.

And so to the book of Job. The book consists of over thirty chapters of men discussing this question in depth, yet all this is a mere curtain-raiser to the great pronouncements of God at the end of the book. By the time the three friends have each sparred with Job (for comfort has indeed transformed into strife by the end of the speeches), there are a couple of pertinent questions on which we would expect God to pass judgement. Is Job or is he not basically an innocent man? And is it or is it not true that people suffer because they have sinned, and are blessed if they are righteous? Most of the debate in the lengthy dialogue can ultimately be subsumed under one or other of these headings.

Yet, paradoxically, God stubbornly refuses to address these questions. It is as if He is refusing even to acknowledge them as valid matters to be raised, let alone offer any answer to them. For He does not even mention them in what He has to say. He is not beholden to answer the questions of man at their behest.

So what does God's speech consist of? Not, as it turns out, pronouncements at all. For God does not in the main make pronouncements. Instead, He asks *questions*, questions that Job doesn't have a hope of answering. What an astonishing anticlimax to the book, on a first and superficial reading! A staggering let-down, just when we expected all would be made plain! Instead of delivering The Answer, God delivers The Question. And not just one. In fact, there are over fifty of them. A multiple of the questions with which we began!

Any questions?

There are questions about creation: about whether Job understands it, and whether or not he was there when it all took place (Answer: No, in both cases). There are questions about the forces and processes of nature, and whether or not Job can either explain or control them (Answer: No). Job is given a tour of the animal kingdom; many kinds of animals are brought before him as he is asked what, why and how (again, No answer). And finally God focuses in detail on behemoth and leviathan. There are even more questions about these two particular manifestations of God's creative genius (ironically, questions about animals we cannot even identify for certain; could this be a deliberate further unpicking of Job's ignorance?!).

The point, of course, is that Job can't begin to answer even one of these questions, never mind all fifty of them! He is utterly boggled by the strangeness, the wildness, the power and the complexity of what God has made. He is reduced to silence; he cannot even begin to explain. So what right does he have to ask so many questions, and to demand an explanation of his own issues? Just who is the questioner here?

God has taught us many things, and we are infinitely in His debt for the wonder of that revelation. But if we think that because He has told us some things we have an entitlement to know all things then we shall have begun to make the mistake Job's sufferings brought him to, and would do well to relearn from the questions of God recorded in the book of Job. For our questioning may carry with it the corollary assumption that we would have done it better. By the definitions of *Who* He is and *who* we are, this cannot be so.

God is to be trusted to know what He is doing with us and with His world. He is the One with the right to question us, not the other way round. And once we start to get onto this wavelength, we shall begin to appreciate the utter magnificence of the ending of the book of Job; it is sheer brilliance, worthy of none but God Himself. If He is to be trusted to create, to organise, to know and to control all *that* (the things He brings to the fore in Job 38–42), then He is to be trusted to do all those very same things in our own lives. With a God like that in control, we have every reason to be confident, even when we are way out of our depth.

Mark Vincent