

One of the popular themes often mentioned through sermons and books in Lenten season is suffering. Well, the world at large, or perhaps we may say, all nations at this very moment are suffering: the coronavirus has created a domino effect, the stock market has crashed, the world is facing global recession worse than GFC in 2008. Many folks will be laid off from their jobs which seem so secured even at the beginning of the year. Suddenly everyone is in panic mood. Deep down in their hearts perhaps people are asking: why should I suffer? I haven't done anything wrong at all! What's going on? No book in the bible which gives us a far better insight of this matter than the book of Job. I do not mean that it provides a clear answer to the mystery of suffering. Instead the book of Job always helps us keep a right perspective when dealing with suffering. This morning let us see how one aspect of this right perspective is manifested in the saying of one of Job's friends.

As we probably know, the greater part of the Book of Job is made up of Job's discussion with his three friends who have come to console with him. From this comes the familiar phrase 'Job's comforters' - those who come with easy speeches but no real consolation to offer. This is not quite fair to Job's friends. They are good and earnest men, who believe in God. The trouble is that their minds cannot move outside the conventional pattern. They think that virtue brings prosperity, misfortune is the sign of God's displeasure against sin. This is the point of view they press upon Job. But this means that the real problem of suffering is evaded and not faced.

I wonder how often when we deal with the problem of suffering, we tend to behave the way as Job's friends did. We would immediately come to the same conclusion

as they did. Even some Christians now add oil to fire by saying this pandemic is God's punishment.

But let us see how Job's friend's answer and perhaps that is our answer as well does not stand up to the test.

Job 5.17-27 is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible, and that means that it is one of the most beautiful pieces of writing in the literature of the world, but for all that it is not the word of God. *"How happy is the one whom God reprove; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you. In famine he will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword. You shall be hidden from the scourge of the tongue, and shall not fear destruction when it comes. At destruction and famine you shall laugh, and shall not fear the wild animals of the earth. For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the wild animals shall be at peace with you. You shall know that your tent is safe, you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing. You shall know that your descendants will be many, and your offspring like the grass of the earth. You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season. See, we have searched this out; it is true. Hear, and know it for yourself."*

It is an exquisite picture of the man who is at peace with God and with himself and with his own people and with his surroundings. But supposing that all that is taken away and for no explainable reason? Eliphaz then has nothing left to say. I am afraid to

say, far too much Christian answer to the mystery of suffering, as always, is of this superficial and conventional type.

Well, if we cannot give a conventional answer to suffering, what can we offer to the riddle of life and the mystery of suffering. Let me use an illustration to see how we should handle this seemingly unanswerable problem.

There is a very moving short conversation near the beginning of the Christian Classic *Pilgrim's Progress*. Poor burdened Christian had met Evangelist, and begged for help and guidance. The Evangelist pointed to the far distance, and asked, 'Do you see yonder wicket-gate?' And Christian looked, and shook his head, and answered, 'No.' Then Evangelist tried again. "Do you see yonder shining light?" he asked. And Christian peered away to the far horizon, and noticed something - one spot that seemed not quite so dark as all the rest; and he answered, 'I think I do.' 'Keep that light in your eye,' said Evangelist, 'and go up directly thereto, so shall thou see the gate.'

If someone asked you or me at this very moment of pandemic and global financial disaster 'Do you really see the answer to the riddle of life and the mystery of suffering?' we should have to answer as bluntly as Christian did, 'No, I don't see it.' But if our inquirer continued to ask, 'Do you see any points of light, any places where the darkness of the mystery is not quite so dark as elsewhere?' I hope we would reply, 'I think I do.' It is some of these beams of light that I invited you to consider now. It may be that if we keep them before us and trust their guiding, we, too, may 'see the gate.'

Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world.' We are told, in the story of the gospel, when Jesus was crucified, the whole place was darkened for at least few hours. And it

was there on the cross, the light of the world, not quenched, but shining through darkness. The risen Christ said in the Book of revelation, 'I am the bright morning star'. Thank God for this bright morning star which drives away darkness. In the midst of the present global and national crisis, the Christian Church at this Lenten season must proclaim Jesus Christ is the bright morning star. It may look very dark all around, it is not the sun that drives away darkness but the morning star. This is our hope even in the midst of pandemic, global financial disaster. Christians must stand up and show to the world our calmness because we have seen the appearance of the morning star, no darkness of whatever kind can overshadow it. The reverse is in fact the truth. He will drive away all kinds of darkness.