

## Responding to Suffering

*A sermon preached by Bishop Michael Stead at the Service of Prayer for those Affected by the Bushfires at St Andrew Cathedral on Sunday 19 January.*

Bushfires have killed 28 people this season. They have destroyed more than two and a half thousand homes, killed thousands of livestock and countless millions of other animals. So far, more than 17 million hectares have been ravaged by fire – that is an area larger than all of England.

For weeks we have looked on in helplessness, heartbroken at the loss of life and the devastation of whole communities. We've been grateful for the heroic work of the RFS and other emergency services, and many Australians have responded with open-hearted generosity to those who have lost so much. And – for people of faith – we have prayed: prayed that God send rain to quench the fires.

Our service today is an opportunity to turn toward our fellow Australians in compassion and mercy: to share with those in need, to grieve with those whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed and comfort those who have lost loved ones. It is also an opportunity to turn toward God, in thankfulness for the life-giving rain we have recently received and in prayerful dependency as we look to the future.

The story of Job shows us how to do this.

As we do this, we should remember that our situation is like Job, in that we don't know the full story. The first part of Job chapter 1 provides a critical insight into the heavenly events that sit behind the tragedy in Job's life. But Job never knows about this. All he knows is that he has lost his children, his possessions and his health, and he does not know why God has allowed all this to happen to him.

Like Job, we don't know why God has allowed the bushfires that have devastated our country.

The book of Job shows us how to respond to suffering when you don't understand why. There are 4 contrasting responses – 2 wrong and 2 right. Each of these responses is a kind of "turning".

The initial response of the friends is a right one – they turn towards Job in compassion. They heard about his distress, and came to comfort him. They found Job sitting on an ash heap, and they sat with him for 7 days. We're told "No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was". (Job 2:13).

When you see people suffering, you can either turn away in indifference, or turn towards them in compassion. This is not a time to turn our backs – it is a time to put our arms around those who mourn, to weep with those who weep, and to comfort them in their distress. Part of what we are doing today is precisely that. Metaphorically to sit on the ash heap with those who have lost everything and to grieve with them. When faced with absolute destruction and devastation there are no words that will make it right again. Now is not the time for meaningless platitudes or trite advice – it is a time for empathy and consolation, and whatever practical help we can offer.

This right response from the three friends is in stark contrast to Job's wife. Her advice is to give up on God – she tells him "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). For her, this tragedy proves that it's time for Job to abandon his belief in a good God who can be trusted to put things right.

It is understandable that the pain of extreme loss can drive some people to reject God. There will be some who can't fathom what we are doing in this service today – They would ask us 'How can you cling to a belief in a good and powerful God, in the face of such destruction and loss?' For them,

suffering in the world proves that God doesn't exist, because they assume that a good God could never let bad things happen to good people.

The book of Job tells us otherwise. From the very first verse of the book, we know that Job is innocent – blameless. And yet, God clearly allows this innocent person to suffer. Why? Job never knows why. And even for us, who are told more than Job, there are still questions left unanswered by the book. But one thing is clear – evil and suffering in this world doesn't disprove God. The Bible is very clear – God is good, but he can and does allow evil things to happen, and even so can still bring about good from it. We see this most supremely at the cross. The killing of Jesus was the ultimate travesty of justice – there never was a man more innocent of wrongdoing. Yet, paradoxically, this evil act was at the heart of God's plan for our salvation.

Knowing all this does not take away our pain and grief, but it helps to know that God is not absent *in* our suffering or indifferent *to* our suffering. God knows what we are going through, because he himself entered into our world of suffering and suffered on our behalf – the innocent suffering for the guilty – in order to bring us forgiveness, healing and restoration.

Suffering and loss still hurts – and it may well make us cry out to God – “Why?” But suffering is not a reason to **turn away from God**. The advice of Job's wife – “curse God and die” – is not how we should respond. Suffering should drive us towards God, not away from him.

Job's wife offers one kind of theological response to the problem of suffering – to blame God. His three friends take the opposite tack – to blame the sinner. They have flipped, from being turned toward Job in compassion, to being turned against him in accusation and blame.

The three friends had a neat theological system that said – “God always punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous”. To them it was evident from Job's circumstances that God was punishing him, therefore he must be wicked.

One of the three friends – Zophar – says to Job, in a model of pastoral insensitivity:

<sup>26</sup> A fire unfanned will consume [the wicked] and devour what is left in his tent. <sup>27</sup> The heavens will expose his guilt; the earth will rise up against him. <sup>28</sup> A flood will carry off his house, rushing waters on the day of God's wrath. <sup>29</sup> Such is the fate God allots the wicked...”  
(Job 20:26-29)

There are nuances to what each friend says, but the message is much the same: *Job, your suffering proves you are a terrible sinner. But if you repent, God will forgive and restore you.*

The friends' advice sounds theologically pure and pious. The only – tiny – problem is, they are utterly wrong – Job's suffering is not a punishment for sin. Their words are pastorally poisonous. Job's suffering was bad enough in itself, but his so-called friends have made it worse by blaming him for his troubles.

When Jesus was asked to join the dots between suffering and sin, he refused to do so. In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus refers to two contemporary events – a group of Galileans killed by Pilate and 18 people killed when a tower fell on them. Jesus asks whether these people died because they were sinners. The answer is No.

What Jesus says in Luke 13 makes it clear that we shouldn't join the dots either – jump to a theological conclusion that attributes blame. The bushfires are not God's judgment on particular individuals or communities. Nor is there any reason to think that the bushfires are God's judgment on Australia for the sins of our nation.

So, if we can't blame God, and we can't blame the sinner, can we find someone else to blame? It seems to me that there has been a lot of that going on lately. Blaming the environmentalists for lack of back burning; blaming government policy for climate change; blaming the fires on arsonists; blaming various levels of government and government agencies for how they have handled the crisis and so on.

Why are we so quick to blame? It is because we believe the fiction that human beings are in control of this planet – or at least, we *should* be, and if we are not, then someone must be to blame.

Please don't misunderstand – when all this is over, I'm sure that there will be lessons to learn, so that we can reduce the risk and severity of bushfires in the future.

But, turning against each other in blame is not the right response, because human beings do not control the rain or the sun or the scorching winds. This is a harsh world, out of our control. This is not the perfect world that God has in store for those who love him. It's a broken world, a perishing world, a world of “droughts and flooding rains”.

And the thing is – God allows this. Every tragedy in this world reminds us that where we live now is not heaven. C.S. Lewis described suffering as ‘God's severe mercy’ – in his mercy, God allows us to experience just a fraction of the brokenness of this world, to break through the illusion that this world is paradise. Earthquakes and floods and bushfires are like the flashing red light and the sign that says “danger ahead”. God is warning us, because he loves us.

That is how Jesus applies the two examples of human tragedy in Luke 13. They are not God's judgment on sinners, but – says Jesus - they are a warning to us - “unless you repent, you too will all perish.” This world is broken, and if all our hopes are in this broken world, then our hopes will perish one day along with it, unless we heed the warning and “repent” while we can.

Which bring us to the fourth and final response – to repent.

Repentance is not an intrinsically religious word. It simply means to turn around or turn back. Fundamentally, it is about our stance towards God. To repent means to turn from indifference to God – or perhaps even hostility towards him – and turn back to him in dependence. It means saying – I admit that you are God and I am not, and that when I try to be God I fail miserably. In short, it means trusting God to be our God. Even when we suffer. Even when life doesn't make sense to us.

That was how Job responded – clinging to God and his goodness, in the midst of the pain and the unknowing. When Job was told what had happened to his children and all his possession, we are told that

<sup>20</sup> ...Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship  
<sup>21</sup> and said: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” (Job 1:20-21).

This continues to be Job's response, even when his friends are telling him that God his enemy. Job tells them: “though he slay me, yet I will hope in him” (Job 13:15).

The story ends with Job turned towards God in humble dependency, still not knowing why, but nonetheless trusting that God knows, and God cares.

Job's response helps us to know how we should respond to the tragedy of these bushfires. If anything, we are better placed than Job, because we know for sure how the story finally ends. There will be a new creation, where there will be no more fires or floods; where God himself will wipe away every tear; and where this perishing world will have been transformed into a perfect world.

So, how will we respond?

Let's not respond by turning away from God in despair, nor by turning against others in blame.

Let's respond instead by turning toward each other in compassion and by turning toward God in prayer and dependency. Let's admit that we are not in control, accept that we won't always know what God is doing, but nonetheless cling tightly to God and his goodness, and pray for his mercy on this broken world as we long for the world to come.

## Readings Job 1:13-22, 2:11-13 + Luke 13:1-5

Job 1 <sup>13</sup> One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, <sup>14</sup> a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, <sup>15</sup> and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" <sup>16</sup> While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" <sup>17</sup> While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" <sup>18</sup> While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, <sup>19</sup> when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" <sup>20</sup> At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship <sup>21</sup> and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." <sup>22</sup> In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Job 2 <sup>11</sup> When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. <sup>12</sup> When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. <sup>13</sup> Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Luke 13 <sup>1</sup> Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them-- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

