

'Can you by searching find out God?', Job 11. 7. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 9 July 2008.

Our text for this morning comes from the book of Job – from the first speech of Zophar, one of Job's three friends who had come to comfort him ... 'Can you by searching find out God?'

First, the story so far. At the outset of the book, Job's goodness and sincerity had been called in question in heaven by Satan the accuser because Job had been greatly blessed and had prospered :

'Does Job fear God for nothing?', Satan had questioned the Lord. 'You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out your hand and touch all that he has... touch his bone and his flesh ... and he will surely curse you to your face!'¹ In other words, Satan argued, Job knew which side his bread was buttered, and served God as faithfully as he did only because of what he got out of it.

And the irony is that, after Satan, with God's permission, has stripped Job of his possessions, his children and his health, Job's goodness and sincerity, which had been called into question *in heaven* because he had been blessed and had prospered, were now called in question *on earth* because he is no longer blessed and prosperous.

His three friends reasoned that, since, as they believed – as they wrongly believed, I add – all suffering here on earth is punishment for personal sin, and since Job was suffering – indeed was suffering greatly – Job must have been guilty of some great sin.²

In his response, Job had not only protested his innocence of any great sin – open or secret – but had repeatedly questioned why God should ever let him suffer as he did, even going so far as to suggest that God seemed to act unfairly, treating the guiltless and the guilty alike.³

Zophar took great exception to Job's response and accused Job, among other things, of being a self-righteous windbag.⁴

'Oh, that God would speak', Zophar replied, 'and open His lips against you'.⁵ 'But if God will not speak for Himself, have no fear – Zophar's here! – I shall speak for Him!' 'Can you by searching find out God? Can you find out the Almighty to perfection?'

Clearly, in the sense that Zophar meant the question – to find out God 'to perfection' as he said – to find out God in all His fullness – the only possible answer is 'most certainly not'. For no one can 'find out' – can fathom – the mysteries of Almighty God – of who and what God is. As King David wrote in one of his psalms, 'His greatness is unsearchable' – 'His greatness cannot be searched out' – using the very same word as Zophar.⁶ A common earthworm would have more hope of understanding the workings of the greatest human or angelic intellect. Yes, indeed, God is far bigger and exalted higher than we can ever imagine.

And yet ... and yet ... though immeasurably greater than anything our minds can conceive, God *can* be known. Not with a knowledge which is exhaustive, of course, but with a knowledge which is none the less real.

And the wonder of it is that He *wants* us to know Him.

'Can you by searching find out God?', asked Zophar. And it was from this text that Isobel Kuhn, a Canadian Missionary working with the former China Inland Mission, took the title of her book 'By Searching', in which she tells the story of her conversion and her call to missionary work among the Lisu people of the Yunnan province in China – and latterly of northern Thailand.⁷ 'Belle' as she was known to her family and friends, 'Big sister' as she was known to the Lisu people, died just over 50 years ago. But she left a huge legacy behind her.

It is estimated that there are now at least 300,000 Lisu Christians in the Yunnan province alone.⁸ Indeed, the Chinese government's Religious Affairs Bureau has proposed considering Christianity as the official religion of the Lisu.⁹ Already over 75,000 Lisu Bibles have been legally printed in China to cater for this thriving work, which can be attributed in part to 'Big Sister' and her 'Rainy Season Bible School'. In the agricultural area where she worked, the rainy season disrupted all normal life of the people, and Isobel devised a plan to hold classes to teach the basics of the Christian faith during the rainy season. From these classes, taught by Isobel and others, countless men went out to take the Christian gospel to their fellow tribespeople.

Isobel herself was converted in her early twenties. She had been brought up in a Christian home, but, in her own words, without having 'a direct confrontation with [the] living Saviour'. In her teens she turned her back on the Christian faith and became an agnostic.

In her book, she tells how, shortly before her conversion, she had asked herself, 'Where does one go to search for God?', and, when attending a Christian meeting, heard a young man say, 'While I was interned in Germany as a prisoner of war, I got hold of a Bible and started to read it. I found God through reading His Word'. Isobel decided to follow suit and 'to search for God' (her words) in the gospel accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

'Where does one go to search for God?' Yes, it is true that we can discover *something* of God through His handiwork – from the vastness of space, in which, in one sense, our home galaxy of 100 billion stars is lost among a hundred billion other galaxies – to the intricacies of the human body with its 75 trillion – yes, 75 *trillion* – cells. And every star and every cell speak loudly to us of God's great power and wisdom.

And yet the revelation of God through His creation is extremely limited – for it has nothing whatever to tell us of His character, of His standards of righteousness and holiness, or of His love and matchless saving grace to sinners. It speaks most eloquently of a *Creator* but has nothing to say of a *Saviour* – nothing to tell us of the greatest love-gift ever given.¹⁰ And, if I am to know more of God, I must enter another classroom than that of creation; namely, as Isobel Kuhn discovered, that of the revelation He has given of Himself in His word.

Yesterday morning a van came from Wickford in Essex to collect goods from here for onward transit to Africa. Bob Fraser, the driver, told me that he and his wife have recently returned from a cruise to Norway. A retired Baptist minister offered to conduct morning devotions on the ship and to preach on the Sunday. Bob estimates that of the 700 hundred or so passengers about 130 attended the Sunday service. Following that service, a man stayed behind to tell the retired minister that he had been 'searching for God' – his own expression – for 40 years and that through the minister's preaching of God's word that evening he had found Him.

Having opened her book with our text for this morning, 'Can you by searching find out God?' Isobel Kuhn ended it with two other verses of scripture – one from the Old Testament and one from the New : the first being God's promise through the prophet Jeremiah, 'you shall find me when you shall search for me with all your heart'¹¹, and the second coming from the letter to the Hebrews, 'He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him'.¹²

Earlier she had written, 'When is the search ended? In one sense, it is finished when our hand, stretched out to God in the name of His appointed mediator Jesus Christ, feels the answering grasp and knows that He is there. But in another sense the searching never ends ... We have only begun to explore our eternal, unfathomable God'.

Footnotes

¹ Job 1. 9-11; 2. 5.

² Although his friends each had their own emphasis – Eliphaz on personal experience, Bildad on tradition and Zophar on logic and reason – they shared in common the widespread belief that if you behaved well you would be greatly blessed in the present life and if you did evil you could expect to suffer.

³ Job 9. 22-24; 10. 3.

⁴ Job 11. 1-4.

⁵ Job 11. 5-6a.

⁶ Psalm 145. 3.

⁷ With her husband John, Isobel Kuhn ministered among the Lisu, in the Yunnan province of China, from 1934 until 1950 when China closed to the gospel. They continued their ministry among another Lisu people group, this time in northern Thailand, until 1954 when Isobel was diagnosed with cancer.

⁸ OMF International. http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/people_groups/lisu_of_china

⁹ Covell, Ralph (Spring 2008). 'To Every Tribe', *Christian History & Biography* (98): 27–28.

¹⁰ You might enjoy looking at a brilliant painting in an art gallery. You might be moved by the artist's skill, perception and insight. But the painting will tell you nothing of the artist himself. Was he tall or short? Humble or arrogant? Cheerful or grumpy? The artist's handiwork can tell you none of these things.

¹¹ Jer. 29. 13.

¹² Heb. 11. 6.