Trinity Sunday

On Friday afternoon our youngest daughter came home, somewhat agitated. A young man driving a BMW had driven very recklessly on the motorway and nearly caused her to crash. “He did signal once. Even when he turned off at Alzey.” She said with a dismissive tone. If it comes as a surprise to you, that the young male owners of BMWs might not be up to the standard of formula one drivers, then you are fresh off the plane. Welcome to the land of the Autobahn.

 These young men could do with somebody at the crossroads, or on the way into town giving them some good advice. “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, at the crossroads she takes her stand, besides the gates in front of the town, she cries out, “To you, O people, I call and my cry is to all that live.” Now the incredible thing is the book of Proverbs was indeed written for young men and especially those whose main pre occupations are women and drink. But it is not only young men, whose behaviour can be destructive, we are all capable of being stupid.

 There are three books the Bible that concentrate on what is called wisdom. It is simply the ability to takes decisions in everyday life that lead to life, rather than those that lead to death. These books are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. Like the countless books that we read like, fitness is fun, the healthy diet, yoga for plumbers or how to house train your alligator, they are practical and concerned making a difference in our lives.

These books are always very positive. So it is no surprise when our first reading from Proverbs gives a joyful picture of the world. It ends with wisdom, being the daily delight of God, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

 What? This woman must be mad ! Didn`t she see Fox news this morning.

Well, if you have ever read the book of Job, one of the wisdom books, you will find that wisdom literature is not positive thinking. It has far more depth. These are not booster books, that ask to build our own little comfort zone and ignore the world. They face the world as it is. It can be a place of darkness, but it is also God`s world. It is a created, planned and ordered universe. We believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth.

There is a great deal to delight our eyes, to tickle our ears, to warm our hearts and to give us peace of mind in this world. But there is also a darkness in this world, that can bring us sorrow and despair.

In the book of Job, we are told of a man, who loses everything that is meaningful to him. It is one blow after another, disaster follows calamity, wailing follows tears, poverty follows riches and there is no sign of god at all. Then Job`s friends come to visit him. They mean well, but they bring him no comfort, just superficial explanations. “All are shown to be inadequate and the point is made here is quite clear. No theory can answer the problem of suffering.

 Instead Job is invited by God to look at things in a different way. “God allows him to view the big picture, something that transcends anything Job is able to see from his own limited perspective. It is as if a curtain is drawn aside and the vast panorama of the world is revealed. Earlier Job had questioned God, calling into question God`s wisdom in allowing him to suffer. Now by gaining a grasp of the whole picture, Job is able to appreciate his own limited and somewhat self -centred view of things. He realizes he is not in a position to understand fully; that God´s wisdom is deeper than his own; and finally, that he can cope with suffering simply because he knows that God is there.” ( A. Mc Grath The Living God p47)

When something bad is happening to us or those we love, we instinctively what to know why?

Why did it happen? Why did two aeroplanes fall out of the sky? Why did my uncle get Parkinson``s ?

Why did she die so young? Sometimes, an answer can be found. But even with all our discoveries and knowledge, there is so much that we cannot comprehend and probably never will.

But when I have been in a time of suffering, most of the time I have known the cause. What I have need most of all, is the answer to a very different question. “How can I go on? How can I cope?

 This is where we turn to our second reading from Paul`s letter to the Romans.

 Paul reminds the Romans that, in their sufferings, they are drawn particularly close to their God. He speaks of Jesus who suffered that we might have a lively relationship with God. The God, who made himself a human being and then suffered and died for them. And the purpose of this was to open to all humanity a relationship with his Father. And of a sign of this new relationship, God pours his love into our hearts through his Spirit.

 Paul suffered a great deal in his life. This is what he wrote to the church in Corinth, Greece about his suffering. 24Five times the Jews gave me 39 strokes with a whip. 25Three times I was beaten with sticks. Once they tried to kill me by throwing stones at me. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. 26I have had to keep on the move. I have been in danger from rivers. I have been in danger from robbers. I have been in danger from my fellow Jews and in danger from Gentiles. I have been in danger in the city, in the country, and at sea. I have been in danger from people who pretended they were believers.

How did he cope?

First of all he thought about God. He doesn`t think of a great ruler, sitting on some distant throne. He doesn`t think of a judge who stands over his life in judgement. He thinks of a God, who sees the suffering of the world and enters it to bring life and hope. But instead of being accepted , he is not simply put to death, but is in effect tortured to death. For Paul, this is something he had to struggle to accept. It took him 7 years to get his head round it. But the idea is incredibly simple.

In a letter to the church in Colossea, Paul says to them, “If you want to know what God is like look at the crucified Christ, “the image of the crucified God (Colossians 1.15) There we see the link between a loving and caring God and the realities of human existence The cross affirms that God has come into the midst of this world. And the purpose of his visit was to bear our suffering, to triumph over it and ultimately to deliver us from it.

 Disease, destruction and death are at the forefront of an army of foes that would destroy our hope, our love, our joy and our purpose in life. When these things threatened to overwhelm us and those whom we love, it is not easy to maintain our trust in our Father in Heaven. There are no easy answers. But there is a hope that we cannot see. There will be a time when all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

 You cannot see it at this moment. Wait and see for the goodness of the Lord is coming.

On Ascension Day, I took part in a service near home. It is held in something quite rare in Rhine Hessen a wood. It was planted some fifty years ago in a derelict land fill site. The local Catholic priest and the Protestant pastor and I have led the service for a couple of years now. This year, my job was to choose a psalm. So I chose Psalm 121 I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. I chose this because I and my family have been struggling with a whole range of problems. This psalm has always been a great comfort and as this forest is surrounded by hills, I thought it appropriate.

 The day before the event, I took our dog , Sunny for a walk to the woods. It was beautiful summers evening. And I thought of a way of introducing this psalm. It was planned to go as follows. “ At the end of this service go down the path over there, walk to the end of the woods and then go straight on for 50 metres. Then what do you see on your left. Die Mittelgebirge and on your right , which mountain do you see. Donnersberg Thunder mountain. Lift up you eyes to the hills and see the majesty of God.

 Well, on the morning of the service, I was out early with my four legged friend. I looked to the left, yes there were the Middle German mountain range and to the right. Nothing, you couldn`t see the mountain it had gone.

 You may find my sermon a bit like that. I have encouraged you to look away from the suffering that surrounds you like the darkness. At the moment you cannot see an end to it. God is not to be seen. I couldn`t see the mountain, but it was there.

 If you have been a Christian for a long time and like me my days are numbered, then you will have been through suffering. There are dark nights of the soul. But you came through it. Battered and bruised and maybe like Paul, you learned that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God`s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit he has given to us.