

In the Mess

HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD?

How big is your God? Job has thrown down the gauntlet in his final speech and now we are expecting, surely, that God will answer him! God, however, remains silent, and instead a young man named Elihu joins the debate!

Job 32

Elihu

¹ So these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. ² But Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. ³ He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him. ⁴ Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. ⁵ But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.

It is clear that Elihu is an angry young man who has been listening to the conversation between Job and his three friends. The three friends have nothing left to say and neither does Job. So Elihu takes the opportunity, uninvited as far as we can tell, to express his opinion. It appears from the text that he is a young aristocrat – none of the others are described in this way.

Commentators are divided about Elihu and his contribution. Most take the view that in truth he has nothing of any significance to add to the debate. The proof of that, is that, when he is finally finished speaking (and he speaks longer than anyone else, including God himself, when he does speak), he is completely ignored by everyone. Once he has finished there is no reference by anyone, including God, to anything he says! His words are considered just the angry thoughts of an arrogant young man.

Other commentators take the view that because, when God finally does speak, he doesn't tell Elihu he was wrong in what he said as he did the other three friends, he must have something significant to say! So the jury is out on this one! Right or wrong I think there might be some things that challenge us in what he says! The first thing that might be a challenge is that he is young.

Job 32

⁶So Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite said:

“I am young in years,
and you are old;
that is why I was fearful,
not daring to tell you what I know.

⁷ I thought, ‘Age should speak;
advanced years should teach wisdom.’

⁸ But it is the spirit in a person,
the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding.

⁹ It is not only the old who are wise,
not only the aged who understand what is right.

Because he is younger than the others, Elihu has waited his turn to speak. I think there might be something in that: listen before you speak! His claim is that he has something none of the others have had when they have spoken and that's why they've not helped Job or persuaded him that he is wrong! He claims he has inspiration from God to speak! Eliphaz spoke from the basis of experience, Bildad appeals to tradition in making his case, Zophar has used reason to persuade Job of his sin. What Elihu brings to the discussion is actually quite important: without inspiration from God himself the argument came to a grinding halt!

True friends, we need the help of the Holy Spirit when wrestling with the difficult issues we face in a world where love is possible. Friends, we can gain all the understanding and theology we want, but we must invite God into it if it is to be of any value or relevance to us or to others.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit when we are with those who are hurting, struggling, hanging on by the skin of their teeth! Perhaps a mistake too many of

us make too often is that we think we know what someone else needs to hear in any given situation.... And it may be that this time we are quite wrong!

There is also another point here that may be a challenge to us: God is no respecter of age! Elihu says the same thing that Paul will later say to Timothy: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for believers, in speech, in life, in faith and in purity.” (1Tim 4 v 11-12)

Elihu says it this way: “It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right.” (32v9) George Muller prayed: “Lord save me from becoming a wicked old man.” To the younger ones among us: God can use you – however young you are! To those of us who consider ourselves older: don’t become an old fool! Young people – be careful not to become arrogant because you think you know everything – you don’t! Be patient, listen, and if God speaks to you have the courage to speak! Older people – don’t become inflexible so that you become closed to what God might truly be saying through those younger than you! Young people: let your life and the way you live give you the ear of those who have gone before you. Older people: be open to the possibility that God speaks through those who are young!

Elihu challenges Job because Job thinks God refuses to speak to him. Job has said that the heavens are like brass! Ever felt like that? Elihu is scandalized by this thought and says that God constantly speaks.

Job 33

¹⁴ For God does speak—now one way, now another—
though no one perceives it.

¹⁵ In a dream, in a vision of the night,
when deep sleep falls on people
as they slumber in their beds,

¹⁶ he may speak in their ears
and terrify them with warnings,

¹⁷ to turn them from wrongdoing
and keep them from pride,

¹⁸ to preserve them from the pit,
their lives from perishing by the sword.

¹⁹ “Or someone may be chastened on a bed of pain
with constant distress in their bones,

God, he says, speaks in dreams and visions, through a person’s conscience, and in and through the experience of pain. We would agree with that...I think!

Sadly, Elihu, like the other three friends ultimately thinks that Job is suffering because he has sinned.

Job 36

⁸ But if people are bound in chains,
held fast by cords of affliction,

⁹ he tells them what they have done—
that they have sinned arrogantly.

¹⁰ He makes them listen to correction
and commands them to repent of their evil.

¹¹ If they obey and serve him,
they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity
and their years in contentment.

¹² But if they do not listen,
they will perish by the sword
and die without knowledge.

Again he is saying what the others have already said: if you repent of your sin, Job, you will be restored! The challenge here is that the consequences of sin in our lives are real, and we do well to repent of anything we know is not pleasing to God. And it is true that God cannot and does not bless sin, so you cannot ask God to bless you in something you know to be sin. If that’s true for you, somewhere in your life, God would say to you what he said to the woman caught in adultery to be stoned: “Neither do I condemn you, but go and leave your life of sin.” Trouble is, we know this is not true for Job, and ultimately Elihu is wrong about Job and what God is doing.

Perhaps one challenge from Elihu is that he finally, at the end of his speech in chapter 37, encourages Job to look at how great God is. It’s almost as if he says: “Job, so how big is your God?” It’s almost as though Elihu is desperately trying to defend God to Job.

Actually, in truth, that's a mistake. It's good to be pointed towards God, but he doesn't need to try and defend God or protect God. Perhaps one of the main problems with Elihu and why he is so angry, is that he is determined to act in God's defence against all that he has seen and heard, and he desperately wants to get God off the hook! Ever done something similar?

Your faith, your theology, your understanding of God has been severely challenged and with all your heart you want to defend and protect God and get him off the hook. Well, let me ask you this question: "How big is your God?" When God finally does speak in the story of Job he will ask that very same question of Job: "How big is your God?" God's answer will be what echoes all the way through the bible and what we especially see as we approach Easter, that God has no need to defend himself or be protected. In fact it is precisely because he does neither that self-giving, self-sacrificial love is at the centre of the universe.

"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not..... He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Isaiah 53 v 2-3; 7) He could have, but he didn't ... stop them that is!

He knew they were right, more right than they knew or understood...but he also knew how quickly it would change. That day, riding on the donkey was extraordinary. People put cloaks on the donkey and cloaks on the road, they cheered, they waved palm branches, they shouted: "Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The Pharisees got grumpy and asked Jesus to quieten the crowd, but he simply told them, that if the people were quiet, the stones would cry out instead! He let them say what they wanted to say – however much they understood what it meant. He could have stopped them, but he didn't. He did nothing to protect himself from what would unfold as the mood changed. And it did, the mood, change that is!

He could have stopped Judas as he rose to leave the table that evening they shared their last supper together. When Judas brought his army to arrest him,

Jesus simply asked if it was all necessary – he wasn't going to defend himself. The disciples wanted to fight but Jesus said no! They mocked him, the soldiers, trying to get him to say something, anything. He answered only to give his name: "Son of God!" He said nothing in his defence before Herod.

As he hung on the cross and was taunted to save himself he prayed for their forgiveness: "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."
(Mathew 23v24)

Precisely because he didn't defend or protect himself, Jesus put self-giving, self-sacrificial love at the centre of the universe. Friends, as we approach and celebrate Easter together that is exactly what we celebrate. We have a God who is big enough not to need to defend himself before anyone, and he doesn't because his actions have spoken so loudly that they reverberate around the universe: "... I love you because I love you because I love you..... I love you all the way to the cross."

Friends, you don't need to be like Elihu and try to defend God in front of those who argue or won't listen, or don't agree with you. All you need to do is point them to Jesus and trust that he is big enough!

One final challenge! When people look at you, what kind of God do they see?

You may remember the story of little Mordecai, son of a Jewish couple who simply didn't want to study, but wanted to play in the woods, swim in the lake and climb the trees. In desperation they took him to the Great Rabbi who was visiting town. The Great Rabbi, on seeing Mordecai, beckoned the boy to come to him, and then quite simply held him to his heart.

The next day Mordecai went to the synagogue and then went to the woods, swam in the lake and climbed the trees. Only this time as he walked in the woods, the word of God became one with the words of the woods which become one with the words of Mordecai. As he swam in the lake, the word of God became one with the words of the lake, which become one with the words of Mordecai. As he climbed the trees, the word of God became one with the words of the trees, which become one with the words of Mordecai.

Mordecai became a great man and helped many. He said: "I first learned the word of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently to his heart."¹

Friends, how big is your God?

Allow yourselves to be held silently to the Father's heart and hear him say: "I love you...."

Let his words become your words.

Let his thoughts become your thoughts.

Let his ways become your ways.

Let the things he hears become the things you hear.

Let the things he sees become the things you see.

Let the things he seeks become the things you seek.

Let the things he loves become the things you love.

Let his life become your life.

Let his heart become your heart.

Friends, let him hold you silently to his heart that you might be transformed by self-giving, self-sacrificial love that lies at the centre of the universe. Then you can love and be loved, you can embrace and not exclude, give and not withhold, because your God is as big as the love he has for you.

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 1st April 2012, by Rev. Ian Phillips.

¹ Manning, Brennan, "*Abba's Child*," NavPress 2002 edition Pg 119-120.