

# Tough Times

**Story: ....of the fastest camel in the world.**

It is said to be a story teller's privilege to adapt stories to fit a particular need and we have now within our community a camel with a deep need for stardom. Between you and me this story really needed a fast horse but we have a camel and camels can run very fast indeed when they put their mind to it.

This story is an ancient one and has been told in many forms and for many reasons over the years though the essential message remains the same. It comes from a time when the gods were many and walked amongst us humans, a time when the gods had particular areas of responsibility such as the harvest, the sea, the underworld, war, fertility etc.

A merchant in the ancient spice trade city of Samarkand sent his servant on an errand to the bazaar and the man came back white with fear and trembling.

"Master" he said, "when I was in the market place I walked into a stranger. When I looked him in the face I recognised him as the God of Trouble. He made a threatening gesture at me and walked away. Now I am so afraid, please give me your fastest camel so I may ride as fast as I can across the desert to the oasis of Tashkan and put as great a distance as I can between me and Trouble."

The merchant in his anxiety for his servant gave him the best racing camel he possessed and the servant was on it and away across the desert in a trice.

Later in the day the merchant himself went down to the bazaar and saw the God of Trouble loitering there in the crowd. The merchant, clearly a brave man, went up to the god and said, "You made a threatening gesture at my servant this morning. What did you mean by it?"

"That was no threatening gesture" said the God of Trouble. "It was a start of surprise at seeing him here in Samarkand."  
"But why would he not be in Samarkand since this is where the man lives?"

"Well, I had been given to understand that he would be meeting me in Tashkan tonight you see."

And so it is that we are told that even the fastest camel in the world cannot always rescue us from life's inevitable troubles.

## **Meditation:**

We sang a hymn earlier on based on words from the Dalai Lama – the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, this meditation stems from these words of his – 'in the face of life's inevitable disappointments, struggles and failures all one can do is to cultivate a sense of inner peace.' As we enter a time of meditation together now let us cultivate a sense of peace in this place of worship and a sense of peace within ourselves, in our hearts and in our minds. As we perhaps soften our gaze or close our eyes and turn our attention inwards, aware of the sounds outside, aware of the sounds within this room, yet with our attention focussed inwards, aware of our breathing, aware of our feet upon the ground, aware of the chair on which we sit. We can imagine that deep within us is a central point where all is still and calm, whatever is happening elsewhere, we have a calm place to which we can go within us, a place in which we can experience an inner peace, an inner peace that is ours and which can never be disturbed. By focussing on this inner peace regularly we strengthen it so that it is there for us as a place of refuge in times of trouble. That inner peace is ours, it has always been and always will be, and we can turn to it whenever we wish. As we sit together in silence for a few minutes now enjoy that sense of inner peace.

May the peace that we create here radiate out into our everyday lives and into the wider world so that all beings may know peace. Amen

## Address:

Some of us I suspect will have been troubled this month by the filling in of tax returns, a form that I have never had to fill in before and only now realise that I could have filled in months ago. There is supposedly a Chinese saying that there are only three things in life you can be sure of – that we will die, that we will pay taxes and that we will meet trouble at some point in our lives. Not even the fastest camel in the world can rescue us from any of these three inevitabilities.

When I was a child I wondered why life is not fair, why bad things happen to good people, why good things happen for people who are clearly very bad indeed. And I wondered about people's religious faith and how come some people lose their faith in the face of life's adversity and why some people's faith is strengthened in tough times.

Do you know much about the Book of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures? It was described by Thomas Carlyle as 'the most wonderful poem of any age and language; our first, oldest statement of the never ending problem – man's destiny and God's way with him here in this earth ... There is nothing written in the Bible or out of it of equal literary merit.'

It's likely that the book of Job was based on an ancient folk story about a very good man whose great goodness draws the attention of God and Satan to him. Satan puts forward the argument that Job is only good because God has given him such a lovely life – a loving partner, many children, great riches. In the folk story God takes away all Job's riches, kills his children and afflicts him with terrible boils. Job's wife calls on him to curse God but he will not. His friends tell him there is no point in being so pious but Job keeps his faith and in the end is rewarded by God with the return of everything he had lost.

The writer of the Biblical Book of Job took this ancient folktale as a starting point but changed the plot. This time Job complains bitterly against the injustice that has befallen him and asks some fundamental questions about human life and God's part in it. His three friends, 'Job's comforters' as they have become known, put forward various arguments to justify the reasons for suffering in human life – and Job destroys their arguments one by one. Interestingly, the arguments put into the mouths of Job's friends two and a half thousand years ago are still used by people today when they are attempting to explain why suffering occurs, why bad things happen and happen sometimes to the most undeserving of people. You'll have heard these ideas many times.

- One of the most common responses to suffering is the feeling that we have in some way deserved it. Someone is ill because they worked too hard or didn't eat enough green leafy vegetables. Someone is to blame for an accident because they made a mistake. We humans search for scapegoats when bad things happen, we want to blame others, we may secretly feel guilty or responsible ourselves. This is taken to an extreme by some religious people who see suffering as a result of sin and wrong doing.
- Another response to suffering is to see it as part of some larger plan, the feeling that there must be some purpose to our suffering and at some point that purpose will be revealed to us.
- Some people believe that suffering teaches us something – makes us a better person in some way.
- Suffering is sometimes described as a test – I've heard people say that we are only sent experiences that we are strong enough to deal with.
- Suffering for sure can be seen as both natural and inevitable; we are physical beings living in a physical world that is at times a very tough environment – like all beings, we live and we die and at some points along the path of life we will suffer. Irish writer John O'Donohue puts it beautifully when he writes "Regardless of how lucky, blessed or privileged one might be, there is no life that is not called at some time to walk through the bleak valley of suffering."

What O'Donohue goes on to say is echoed by spiritual writers of all ages and by the world's religious traditions – suffering is a terribly isolating and lonely path, it is frightening and dislocating and the way out of it is to go through it, to not resist but to dive deep into it, to be open to what it brings.

And one of the fruits of suffering is compassion. Compassion meaning at its root – 'to suffer with'. Yes suffering can isolate us yet one of its potential messages is love – the reaching out to others in moments of despair – be it because of their despair or our own, sharing the darkest moments and trusting that dawn will break once more.

And perhaps that love and connectedness can strengthen us sufficiently to endure the tough times of life because three things we can be sure of – we will die, we will pay taxes, and we will meet trouble along the way, camel or no camel.