

WAS THIS AN ACT OF GOD? (Christian reflections upon the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami)

The world is still reeling in shock! More than one hundred and fifty thousand dead, millions made homeless, one hundred thousand children orphaned and whole communities flattened. The television images of the devastation caused by the earthquake and tsunami of Boxing Day 2004 have been truly heart-breaking. None more than the painful images of bewildered children, too traumatised even to cry, gazing out over desolate landscapes for vanished families and villages. Everything lost: utterly appalling.

The relief effort has been swift, heart-felt and on a staggering scale. In the UK alone, 83% of the population have contributed to over £100 million raised by the Disasters Emergency Committee, more from individual charities, compelling a similar contribution and the prospect of a long overdue debt relief from the UK government.

But we're a nation that is not only horrified by the scale of this tragedy but also confused by the spiritual implications. Although the compassion expressed in charitable donations may reflect the vestiges of a Christian morality (since 70% of the UK still describes itself as Christian), our culture is largely pluralist in outlook with no settled religious response to such events.

Response of other religions to suffering

The dominant religions of the affected areas hardly, in my opinion, offer much comfort!

- 1) Hinduism which is the dominant faith of India, regards suffering in an individual life as what is deserved for evil done in a previous incarnation, the balancing of the forces of karma which we must accept.
- 2) Islam, which is the dominant religion of Indonesia, regards suffering as determined by the will of Allah – his 'finger of judgement' upon wickedness which must be accepted with submission.
- 3) Buddhism, which is the dominant religion of Sri Lanka, regards suffering as a kind of 'illusion' caused by frustrated desires. If we could only escape from such longings, eg for lost loved ones, we could escape from suffering.
- 4) Faced with such alternatives, many retreat to atheistic explanations: this is just the unfortunate result of powerful natural forces. As Richard Dawkins expresses it, "*in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt and other people are going to get lucky and we won't find any rhyme or reason in it, or any justice.*"¹

A Christian response

But how are Christians to respond to such a disaster? Many unbelievers assume that this will undermine our Christian faith because they think we believe in a God who is always nice to everyone. Therefore such a tragedy must prove either that he is not nice (because this is horrible) or that he is not God (because he couldn't stop it). They fail to consider the alternative that for a powerful and loving God to prevent all disasters would actually be worse than allowing them!

The truth is that the Bible is full of powerful reflections upon human suffering; whole books are devoted to understanding God's involvement in it (eg Job, Habakkuk and I Peter) and Christians explore this issue more than most because we do believe in a God who is good and powerful and who governs our world. We do believe in a God who took flesh in the person of Jesus to suffer illegitimacy, homelessness, prejudice, betrayal, torture and crucifixion; and because, in following Him, we are told to expect not only the same trials as others but the additional cost of sacrifice and persecution! But across the nations and down the centuries, Christians have in times of suffering come not to abandon faith in Christ, but to seek his comfort and solace more than ever before.

In a short article, I can only hope to consider the issues raised but briefly. For further thought I would recommend either the brilliant more thorough treatment of Don Carson, "*How Long O Lord*"; or the easier little book by John Dickson "*If I were God, I'd end all the pain*" (struggling with evil, suffering and faith), which is short, sensitive and easy to give away.

In the midst of suffering we need not pious platitudes of philosophical debate, but someone to be there for us, to cry with us and support us any way they can. But from a distance, as perhaps we are, it's

¹ 'The Evolution of the Darwin Man' (2000)

important to consider what the Bible says on such things, for our own confidence in God and so as to engage with unbelievers willing to listen.

In our review of the Bible's teaching on this issue, we shall end with the deep compassion of God for all who suffer, expressed in the attitude of Jesus described in Luke 7:11-17. Here we read of a funeral, a scene multiplied many times across South-East Asia, "As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out – the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her...", just as his heart goes out today to all those suffering as a result of this disaster. But before we get to this teaching, we must first face some more uncomfortable truths:

I. God has sent this wave and we all deserve much worse!

The Bible is clear that God governs all the details of our world and universe. His appointed King, his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord directs the course of history in this world, including its "natural" disasters.

However, the Bible is also clear that, while he enthusiastically sends countless blessings upon us all, he sends suffering reluctantly: "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 33: 11). Theologians call this aspect of God's government his "permissory" will. He sustains the murderer's heart-beat and empowers the tsunami wave but without delighting in the pain they cause. So why does he allow it?

In Romans 8:20-22 we read, "the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth".

In judgement upon the rebellion of humanity against him, God has subjected mankind and our world to decay and death. As John Stott puts it "So futility, bondage, decay and pain are the words the apostle uses to indicate that creation is out of joint because under judgement. It still works, for the mechanisms of nature are fine-tuned and delicately balanced. And much of it is breathtakingly beautiful, revealing the Creator's hand. But it is also in bondage to disintegration and frustration."² Tectonic plates now move causing waves and death as part of God's judgement upon this creation: "Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought upon the earth" (Psalm 46).

If God had not judged the wickedness of mankind, the implications would be horrendous: it would mean that God is not righteous and just, that evil will be allowed to triumph and that God will not carry out justice for all who are victims of sin. These consequences would actually be much worse for eternity than the suffering caused by his justice in judging the earth, partially now and completely on the day of judgement.

However, it is **not** true that the people who died in this disaster must be more wicked than others as some militant Islamic clerics have been claiming; eg "Whoever reads the Koran, given by the maker of the world, can see how these nations were destroyed. There is one reason: they lied, they sinned and were infidels. Whoever studies the Koran can see this is the event." (Ibrahim al-Bashar, Jan 5, al-Majd T.V.) When confronted with this idea, Jesus refused to conclude that only the wicked suffer: "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? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:4). God did not gather more wicked people around the Indian Ocean to destroy them with a wave. If that were so, why not send the wave upon the UK and on my home?

Jesus was clear that the more innocent suffer along with the more wicked. But he insisted that unless we all repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness, we will all perish ourselves. We have to grasp that the worst is yet to come. A day is coming when not just a few millions, but all the peoples of the earth who have ever lived, will be raised to be engulfed by the judgement of God. The Bible describes arrogant and defiant unbelievers then calling upon the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them to hide them from the wrath of God; on that day, of which the gospel speaks (Romans 2:16 and Revelation 11) Jesus Christ himself will send all those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to an eternity of ruin and isolated punishment (2 Thessalonians 1). Those who have never heard of Christ will be condemned for their rejection of their creator of whom they are aware but have rejected in favour of their preferred spiritual ideologies and religious idols. We have such an inflated view of ourselves (and therefore of others) that we fail to grasp that all nations, like ourselves, deserve God's

² BST 'The Message of Romans' – John R W Stott [page 239]

wrath and punishment for the way we treat God and each other. Our pride and selfishness, our anger and prejudice, our greed and lust, our envy and slander that issues from rebellious hearts deserves hell from God. And even children, though small and beautiful, are little people like us, sharing our nature and deserving our fate.

As a father who loves my kids, I cannot enjoy the prospect of their judgement, but I know that they are growing up to be just like me and deserving the condemnation of God. This tsunami is a foretaste of what is to come.

Our response should, in the first place, be to be very afraid of God. Psalm 36 speaks of how there is no fear of God in us because we flatter ourselves too much to detect or hate our sin. This tsunami should awaken us to fear, not just the sea, not just nature, but the God who designed and directs the forces of nature. One day not just Asia but the world will be engulfed by the wrath of God. And we should learn to be very, very, very afraid of God. *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience but shouts in our pain. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world”* (C.S. Lewis). *‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’* (Prov 1:7).

2. God has suffered our punishment to open the way into his new creation!

Faced with tragedy, we’re tempted to point at God and yell “Why don’t you do something?” God could reasonably ask us, “Why don’t you?”

Much suffering is caused by human will and choices

The fact is that thirty thousand children die every day from poverty caused by unequal distribution of food! In this country alone, one hundred and forty thousand unborn babies are killed every year mainly because they are inconvenient! Countless Africans will die this year from Aids primarily because of sexual promiscuity! And so much pain is caused by human violence, adultery and greed: an earthquake in California kills very few but the same earthquake in India kills very many because of economic inequality! Well might God say “You do something!” And some are certainly trying.

God has done something – by entering our world, suffering and providing a means by which we can be saved from his eternal judgment.

Amazingly, although we deserve much worse, God still loves each one of us passionately! Despite our hostility to him, God still longs for us to turn back to him. So much so, that the supreme being, our creator, shrank himself to a few cells in Mary’s womb to be born as an ordinary man so that he could die like we do. And in his painful death on that cross, he carried the consequences, the punishments, due to all who trust in him, for our evil and rebellion.

The prophet foretold him accurately in Isaiah 53:3-6 *“³He 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. ⁴Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* God chose not to remain distant in judgement as Islam teaches, but to enter into and share our sufferings himself. He suffered judgements we deserve. He was treated as if he was me, so that I can be treated as if I were him.

Suffering now is like the birth-pains that point to something wonderful that is to come; the new creation

In so doing, he opened the way for all who follow him into his new creation. In Matthew 24 Jesus describes earthquakes, famine and wars not as the end of the world but like the birth pangs of an expectant mother in labour: the pain is the sure sign that something wonderful will be born in the end. Likewise this tsunami signals, not the end of the world, but that one day the new world will be born. The Bible describes this new creation as free of the corruption and pain that our evil has brought into this world. *“God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”* (Revelation 21:3-4).

No more mass graves, no more coroners searching mortuaries, no more grief-stricken parents and bewildered orphans. God will personally comfort us and wipe our tears away as he welcomes us into the eternal kingdom of God.

This gospel is wonderful news for a grief stricken world. Out of compassion God has acted in mercy. The Father Almighty only had one Son; he sacrificed him to purchase us out of an eternity of just punishment for an eternity of undeserved joy.

Our response to such love can only be gratitude – intense thankfulness for the loving mercy and kindness of God in providing eternal relief from what we deserve. God sacrificed his only son to rescue us. The only appropriate response is deep gratitude.

3. God has shown compassion to us – and we are to share it with others!

We are to mourn with those who mourn and we are to show compassion to our neighbour as we have been shown it by God. In Luke 10, Jesus described a Samaritan who, coming across a stranger beaten up and half dead, spared no expense in doing what he could to alleviate his distress. He told us to go and do likewise. Jesus was the ultimate ‘good samaritan’, giving up his life for our salvation. And he demonstrated such love in his response to that widow from Nain with whom we began (Luke 7). As he was confronted with her suffering, as the God who shows compassion to orphans and widows, “his heart went out to her”. He didn’t know her; there is no suggestion that she asked for it or deserved it. With enormous sympathy, Jesus got involved and granted the dead boy new life.

Following Jesus, “as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.” (Galatians 6:10)

In particular, mindful of our Christian brothers and sisters who will suffer like everyone else in these nations (and especially in light of their persecution, particularly in Indonesia) to “share with God’s people who are in need” (Rom 12). The Barnabas Fund reports the words of Godfrey Yogarajah of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka: “The tsunami hit us on a Sunday morning while thousands were at church services. Thousands of churches have been affected and some congregations were wiped out by a tidal wave. There were also Christian orphanages affected. Some children were swept away and their bodies recovered later. As there is a shortage of coffins many are being buried in polythene bags or wrapped in mats. A pastor told me that most of the bodies have decomposed and some in the east have been partially eaten by the crocodiles in the lagoon. He was speaking to me full of emotion after burying his own niece, his junior pastor’s wife and two children.”³

We will want to give whatever we can, sacrificially and generously, especially through Christian organisations like the Barnabas Fund, Tearfund and Anglican Mainstream. For we will want to ensure that the poor receive enough food and clean water, enough blankets and medicines, enough building materials and credit, and most precious of all, when they have strength to hear it – the wonderful saving message of what God has done in Christ for them.

And above all, we will want to pray. To pray that those who have lost so much, might in Christ gain everything in the world to come. And especially to pray for our own brothers and sisters in Christ caught up in this tragedy.

Contrary to Islam, it is not the people of South East Asia who are especially wicked. We are all wicked – and we deserve much worse ourselves; God sent the wave but we are all responsible and share the blame.

Contrary to Hinduism, God has not left us to suffer punishment for evil we have done in the past; he became man to die in our place, to suffer our penalties that we might enter his new creation.

Contrary to Buddhism, we are not to close our hearts to suffering and so escape from caring but to show the compassion of God to those who must hurt so much.

In his book ‘Night’, Nobel Prize Winner Elie Wiesel tells of how, as a prisoner in Auschwitz concentration camp, he and other prisoners were forced to watch a fourteen year old boy tortured and hung from a gibbet in front of them all. Behind him, he heard another prisoner repeatedly whisper “Where is God? Where is God?”

The answer is that God was in another young man, hung on a gibbet, crucified outside Jerusalem. There God shared in our suffering, indeed removed the suffering we deserve for eternity so that we may enjoy him forever in his paradise kingdom.

May some good come from this awful tragedy in many who have suffered coming to “the Father of compassion and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles” (2 Corinthians 1:3). This was an act of God, but thankfully not the only act of God. And we pray that God’s people will know the truth of Ps 46:1-3:

¹ God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

³ though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. ⁴

Richard Coekin – 14 January 2005

³ Source: Barnabas Fund leaflet about Tsunami – www.barnabasfund.org or 01672 565031

⁴ The New International Version - Anglicised, (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.) 1984.