

## REFLECTIONS ON THE TSUNAMI AND THE QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane - 12th January 2005

‘Archbishop, where is God in this tragedy?’ I have been asked many times since the earthquake and tsunamis.

My first answer is this. We have a God who weeps with us, wherever there is suffering and pain.

Again and again, the Christian gospel assures us that God is not an absent deity, cold-hearted and distant from our sufferings. Rather, in Jesus Christ – fully God and fully human – he shares in all the joys and pains of life. More than that, on the cross Jesus shares in mortality and death. His resurrection, rising from the grave on Easter Sunday to a new and fuller life, shows that he has broken the power of death, and so for us who trust in him, death is not the end, not the ultimate enemy who overcomes us all.

These truths are not changed by the tsunami – rather, the tsunami shows how deeply we need God’s love in life, and God’s reassurance that he is indeed greater than death.

The next question that people often ask is, ‘If God really is all-loving and all-powerful, surely he would not allow this to happen?’

Philosophers have wrestled with this over the centuries – and never reached a satisfactory answer. There is a good reason for this. Faith is not an intellectual exercise – reducing God to something our finite minds can grasp, or only being prepared to believe in the sort of God who behaves in ways we can understand. God is too big for us. And faith is about having a living relationship with the God of love who promises to be with us in all circumstances – if we are ready to accept him.

This is why Christianity has withstood the tests of time.

Repeatedly, those who face tragedy tell how they were sustained through it by – and often, only by – God’s presence with them, his love, his comfort, his strength, and his encouragement to pick up the pieces and go forward. Many of us know this in our own lives – it was my experience both on Robben Island, and later when my first wife died suddenly. When you have experienced him like this, you cannot doubt his love, and his power to transform lives.

Another question I have been asked is whether this is an ‘act of God’ or just an accident of geology. God has created an awe-inspiring universe, in which our tiny planet, through processes like this earthquake, has produced conditions which sustain life. Indeed, scientists say there was such a tiny possibility of this happening as to be almost beyond coincidence. So it is not helpful to call earthquakes ‘acts of God,’ unless we say the same

of other wonders of nature, from the awesome power of the Niagara Falls, to the marvel of a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis.

There is also a human dimension, if not to the earthquake, then to its consequences. Scientists tell us that the cause of the earthquake was beyond human control. But they have also pointed out that the effects of the tsunami in many areas were worsened because of our destruction of mangroves and climatically insensitive building developments.

The Bible tells us that we should be responsible stewards of God's creation. In this case it means that we must heed the call by the World Wide Fund for Nature and others, to ensure that reconstruction is ecologically appropriate and sustainable. We must also accept that the consequences of global warming, such as rising sea levels, are our fault, and must act to rectify matters. All of us must bear our responsibilities for this, wherever we live on this planet.

It would be wrong to think that God allowed the earthquake to punish humanity in some sort of simplistic and vindictive way – sweeping good and bad together into the sea. But at the same time, we must never forget that each one of us is accountable to him for our actions. We are not puppets – God gives us choice in how we live.

It is more helpful to see this as a 'wake-up call' to use our choices wisely – especially in how we share the resources of the world. Richer countries have early warning systems; Japan and San Francisco can afford buildings that withstand earthquakes. Poverty, rooted in unjust economic systems, means natural disasters always seem to hit the poorest hardest. It is also a wake-up call to recognise the ultimate realities of life – that we cannot understand and control everything, and must rely on God to direct us, and to forgive us when we fail to be the people we ought.

Whenever tragedy strikes – whether on a huge scale, like the tsunamis, or in individual lives and families, we must always remember that God never turns his back on us. 'I am with you always, to the end of time' Jesus promised his disciples.

God also shows his love in inspiring countless loving human actions. Alongside the disaster there have been numerous stories of people risking, even forfeiting, their lives to save others; local people, devastated by their own losses, opening their homes to foreigners; and the outpouring of aid from individuals.

'Love your neighbour as yourself' taught Jesus. One lesson of this tragedy is that the whole human family are our neighbours. We each share the responsibility to live generously towards the entire human race, not just those affected by the earthquake. We must also remember those like the 40 million people on our planet who live with HIV/AIDS, of whom 3 million will die this year. So will another 2 million from TB, and another million from malaria. Both of these are easily curable – and we can easily afford it, if we choose to do so.

‘In all things God works for good’ says a famous Bible verse. My final answer to those who ask these questions would be that the God who overcame death on the cross can and does bring hope and new beginnings even in the darkest tragedy – it is up to us to let him touch us.