

TSUNAMI & REFLECTIONS ON OUR IMAGES OF GOD

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 23rd January 2005

Luke 13: 1-5; Isaiah 40: 1-8; Psalm 145: 1-13

Advertised Theme:

Is a tsunami an “act of God”, a sign of evil in the world – or even ‘proof’ that God is not a loving God after all? Reflecting on these issues requires us to do some thinking around our images of God.

Sermon:

Being in Hilton on a stormy night is dangerous! You might think I’m referring to the tornado-like storm that ripped through Hilton and some surrounding valleys on Friday night. Yes, serious damage was reported - windows blown out, trees on cars and roofs, and roofing all over the place! More than one parishioner used the descriptive term “like Delville Wood”.

But that’s not the most dangerous thing. Oh no! Even more dangerous was that soon afterwards, the men of Hilton came out with their chainsaws and axes! You could hear chainsaws working well into the night, and all day Saturday. On Friday evening, my family and I drove down Celtis Road (once it had been cleared of fallen trees) to check out damage at the home of members of our family. The road was swarming with men and their chainsaws; one crowd included a local member of the Greek Mafia, carrying an axe. He said it had been used to chop down trees and clear the road. In the gathering dark on a Friday night, you believe whatever a man with an axe tells you! We smiled politely and drove on...

Well, that may be a light-hearted way to begin a serious sermon – and it really highlights the wonderful and immediate response of people to their neighbours, helping clear trees that blocked driveways and roads; even municipal workers were out much of the night restoring power and clearing damage.

It is a very small but real example of the outpouring of community assistance that often happens when there has been tragedy – like the tsunami to which I said we would refer in today’s sermon, which also came up just as suddenly as Friday’s storm, no-one aware of how ferocious the calm sea could be.

All over the devastated areas, in what has been described as one of the worst natural disasters in known history, there are wonderful stories of people helping one another, strangers coming to the aid of others, seeking to relieve distress, offering compassion and practical aid. Of course it will take decades to repair damage and to re-house the millions who lost homes and livelihoods, but a massive effort is underway.

This is a mark of humanity – without reference to religion, culture or class – and is often said to be a built-in feature of humanity, especially evident when there is a crisis. If we are made in the image of God, and if God is a God of compassion, then surely humanity reflects that – even if poorly and inconsistently at times.

But IS God a God of compassion? For some, events like this bring out questions not already resolved and challenge comfortable ideas of God that were cherished until tragedy struck.

Of course, tragedies are happening all the time. To individuals. To villages no one hears about in the media. To countries. To people in war. To people living quiet lives in poverty. To people in wealthy and noisy cities. To people living holy lives in godly service to others.

Why should we question God, or suddenly doubt God’s reality or love or compassion when difficulties come to ME? But the fact is, we do – when it strikes me, or those I love – or happens on a vast scale such as this tsunami.

I suggest that to ask questions, even to challenge God, is a mark of faith. A wise rabbi recently highlighted this, saying it was the heroes of faith in the Scriptures who questioned God. Look at Abraham – recorded as saying to God, in response to seemingly fantastical promises made to him, “But how can this be?”. Look at Moses. Look at Job. Questioning reaffirms that we have a relationship with God, no matter how tenuous. Questions cause us to re-examine our belief, and re-look at our relationship with God in the light of our belief. Of course, people like Job and Moses, and others of faith throughout the centuries, have persisted in dealing with their questions, so that whilst some answers will become apparent, and others will never come to us in this lifetime, we don’t lazily use the mere existence of our questions as an excuse to ignore God.

There have been numerous press articles reflecting on all this lately, and no doubt other sermons on the topic too. I have here a small selection of articles from Sunday and daily papers, from the Mail & Guardian, as well as statements from various church leaders. It seems that many have been openly asking these questions. They are not new, of course – just that such a massive event brings them all out into the open again. Philip Yancey’s wonderful book “Disappointment with God” strives to examine three questions he says Christians don’t often ask aloud: Is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden?

“Where was God when the tsunami struck?” read one headline. And of course some in our secularised western world, who hold no faith or who ridicule the Christian faith, have used this to taunt Christians and others who believe in God.

The writer of an article in yesterday’s local newspaper (*) thought it amusing that “Christian sophisticates” (the writer’s term) wrestled with such things. The rest, he said just know that such things happen – he used a more colourful term which I won’t repeat here – referring to fate that just happens; he was patronising and disparaging of the need for believers in God to find meaning out of tragedy.

(* Article: William Saunderson-Meyer, *Weekend Witness*, Sat 22 Jan 2005 – “xxx”)

Tell that to someone who has lived through a tragedy! Tell that to a survivor of a tragedy! Tell a community who have suffered hugely that any attempt to find meaning from it, is as useless and pointless as trying to find meaning in life, for effectively, that is what is being suggested.

We live in a world created with “intelligent design” and with purpose – God’s purposes. That gives meaning to life! And so of course a broad stream of humanity want and need to make sense of what happens to us in life. Even the person who often has not considered such questions, at least not in any depth, is usually prompted to do so when the usual comforts of life are removed or a painful loss occurs.

And it all challenges our views of God. For there is no such thing as a uniform view on God.

Sometimes, tragedy brings out the worst amongst the Christian community. In my memory, the classic example of that is reflected in the judgmental words spoken when a flood hit Laingsberg in the S. Cape just about the time the first casino opened at Sun City. At least a few pulpit preachers pronounced, on behalf of God, a very clear link between the two events.

What a vindictive view of God! Yes, I know the proverb indicates that God causes his sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good and the bad together – but that is more an indication of the graciousness of God who gives good things to ALL people, even though some may still not acknowledge the Giver of the gift. We need to acknowledge, too, that the scriptures include specific warnings from prophets of God, that if the people of Israel insisted on rebelling against God and refused to turn back to God, they would suffer consequences. [Note: “they”, i.e. the people of Israel – not some people 1000kms away.]

But nowhere in Scripture is there material to indicate a vindictive God, behaving like a man with a hangover getting up in a foul mood the next morning and deciding to send an earthquake on an arbitrary group of people!

The Scriptures warn that earthquakes and calamities will occur, and there will come a time when they will worsen as the judgement day of God approaches.

Jesus himself seems to indicate that bad things DO sometimes “just happen”, according to the short Gospel passage chosen for today. Evidently a group of people had been killed because a tower fell down upon them. According to many religious people at the time, it was believed that if such calamity came upon you it was clear sign that you or your parents were guilty of major sin. This too could be said of people with permanent illness or disability.

Jesus directly challenges such belief and asks: “Do you think these people were worse sinners than everyone else...? Do you think they were more guilty than all the others

living in Jerusalem...? **I tell you, no!**” So note that Jesus clearly speaks out against a popularly held religious idea of the time.

He goes on to say, “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Most clearly, that is an indication of the need for ALL people to turn to God, and Jesus refused to highlight one group as more needing of that or more deserving of punishment than another... in other words, quit pointing fingers at others!

Let me read to you a section from the opening chapter of a book, “Signposts to Spirituality”. (*) I had been re-reading the book in my own prayer times lately, intending to use it later this year for a series of sermons. Its author is Trevor Hudson, renowned worldwide for his down-to-earth writings on faith and daily living – and he is a minister from Benoni. (And you though the only good thing that came from Benoni was Charlize Theron!)

(*) *Struik Christian Books, Cape Town – first published 1995.*

Trevor describes meeting with a former medical missionary and now a practising psychiatrist, who was his friend and mentor. Having listed some personal concerns, the mentor asked Trevor: What is your picture of God?

“At first the question seemed unrelated and irrelevant to the concerns I had expressed. What did my view of God have to do with crowded days, an over-scheduled appointment book and strenuous efforts to achieve and accomplish? Surely, I thought to myself, all that was needed was some practical counsel regarding time-management and realistic goal setting.

“However the question communicated my companion’s clear conviction that **the way we live is profoundly shaped by our picture of God** (emphasis – mine). Perhaps this was also why William Temple, that great Anglican minister and spiritual leader, had once rather provocatively observed that if people live with a wrong view of God, the more religious they become the worse the consequences will be, and eventually it would be better for them to be atheists.

“In his autobiography, William Barclay, known throughout the world for his helpful commentaries upon scripture, recounts a personal experience that powerfully affirms our ongoing need to examine our picture of God. The BBC had asked Dr. Barclay to do a series of talks for radio broadcast on the subject of the miracles in the gospels. Without denying the historicity (historical reality) of the gospel records, Dr Barclay stressed the importance of the symbolic recurring of these miracles for contemporary life. As Jesus stilled the storm on the Lake of Galilee, he continues to still the storms that rage in human hearts. When the series ended, he was interviewed by the producer and asked how he had come to such a view.

‘I told him the truth. I told him that some years ago our 21-year-old daughter and the lad to whom she would some day have been married were both drowned in a yachting accident. I said that God did not stop that accident at sea, but he did still

the storm in my own heart, so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time still on our own two feet.’

When the interview was broadcast, letters poured in. Amongst them was an anonymous letter:

‘Dear Dr Barclay, I know why God killed your daughter. It was to save her from being corrupted by your heresies.’

Not having the writer’s address, Dr Barclay could not respond, but he writes:

‘If I had had that writer’s address I would written back, not in anger – the inevitable blaze of anger was over in a flash, but in pity and I would have said, as John Wesley said to someone, “Your God is my devil.” **The day my daughter was lost at sea there was sorrow in the heart of God.**’ (Emphasis mine.)

(Quote ends; Signposts to Spirituality - pp 19-20)

To conclude, I will read a few paragraphs from a statement issued by our Diocesan Bishop, Rubin Phillip, which I found very good at expressing a number of key points. (I have left out other sections partly for length and partly because the issues have been already dealt with.)

**Statement on the Tsunami Disaster
Bishop Rubin Philip
Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of Natal**

(extract...)

The insurance industry has not helped the situation by previously referring to natural disasters as ‘acts of God’. We seem to have a fixation with either pinning the blame for all human tragedy on God, or erroneously and libellously interpreting this as God’s judgement against certain groups or categories of people. This is often a convenient way for ‘religious people’ to remain aloof from the pain and suffering of humanity and to stigmatise and categorise people into ‘holy’ and ‘unholy’ and to retreat into spiritual ghettos of their own making. [As highlighted in my sermon, from today’s Gospel reading (Luke 13: 1-5), we see that Jesus directly contradicts such an approach.]

Over and against these erroneous and destructive interpretations of God’s action in history, the Bible affirms that God is love and that every good and perfect gift comes from him. Tsunamis and viruses that cause the death of millions of people are anything but ‘good and perfect gifts’, and what parent would give a destructive gift to their child? Humanity is the object of God’s eternal and compassionate love, and as Christians we believe that this has been demonstrated most convincingly by God entering humanity through the person of Jesus Christ, and sharing in the suffering and pain of our human condition (even to the point of death).

How then do we reconcile God's love for humanity with this enormous human tragedy? This becomes a complex theological issue with no simple answers. However, what we do know from the Bible is that as creator and sustainer of life, God made everything good and perfect.

However, as we have now witnessed, there are deep flaws and fractures causing the earth to writhe and convulse in increasingly unpredictable ways (confirmed by the \$40 billion payout by the insurance industry for natural disasters last year alone). This is partly to do with our own mismanagement and abuse of the environment as agents of free will who seem to have a bent towards self-destruction and greed. This bent is what the Bible calls 'sin' and has resulted in the suffering and travail of both humanity and the entire created order. Earthquakes become one of the consequences of creation's convulsions awaiting the birth of a new world in which the relationships between God, humanity and creation are restored.

Christ suffered and died to bring us salvation and to restore our relationship with God, our neighbour and creation. This gives us hope in the midst of calamity and despair and enables us to respond with love and compassion to the victims of all human tragedies – be it in the form of natural disasters or the destruction of lives in Darfur, the Middle East and elsewhere caused by man's inhumanity to man.

May we continue to respond with the same vigour and compassion to the victims of this terrible human tragedy, and all other disasters and calamities in the world, as we eagerly await the coming of God's rule and reign on earth.

So, questions of faith about the nature and role of God in the face of pain and suffering will inevitably arise, and we do not have to avoid them, but struggle with them. After all, our faith is only as strong as the questions we ask, and as God's 'creatures' we will never fully understand the mind of the Creator – not in this life at any rate!