

# Some Christian Reflections on Natural Disasters and Suffering

## Boxing Day Tsunamis, 2004

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The following manuscript is a copy of a sermon preached on January 2, 2005 at All Saint's Cammeray. It has been made available for personal reflection and consideration and not for publication. I have used the New International Version of the Bible and quotations are found in text boxes. Please contact me if you wish to quote from or use some of the material contained herein. I can be contacted by calling 02 9901 4990 or emailing [nfortescue@accsoft.com.au](mailto:nfortescue@accsoft.com.au).

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*A Psalm to pray through as we begin.*

<sup>NIV</sup> Psalm 77:1 I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.<sup>2</sup> When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.<sup>3</sup> I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint.<sup>4</sup> You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.<sup>5</sup> I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;<sup>6</sup> I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired:<sup>7</sup> "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?"

<sup>8</sup> Has your unfailing love vanished forever? Has your promise failed for all time?<sup>9</sup> Have you forgotten to be merciful? Have you in anger withheld your compassion?"

A dark shadow has cast itself across our world. I am sure that I do not need to rehash the images. I do not need to rehash the numbers dead, the numbers homeless, the numbers missing. The numbers with little or no future. The numbers that stand now on the verge of greater tragedy through disease, sickness, or loneliness. A dark shadow has cast itself across our world.

And at a time of year when we remember that Jesus is the mighty, mighty king. At a time of year when we remember that the all powerful God humbled himself to live as a babe. Christmas is the time when we remember that God has a plan for the entire universe and is at work bringing about that good plan. But as if ironically, we have juxtaposed against the perfect goodness of Christ, this shadow. A dark shadow has fallen across this comforting doctrine of Christmas – the shadow is the problem of evil.

Now in the *Sydney Morning Herald* this week one letter writer put this whole situation perfectly well. He accused Christians of trite and simple answers. He called on Christians to give us some way of understanding this tragedy in light of the Christmas message. And I think he is right. Too often we take a trite approach and we don't seek answers to the questions that are burning in our heart. A time like this is no time for trite answers. It is a time for answers that put out the flame in our hearts, that quell the ache in our emotions, that answer the existential questions. For the problem of evil is an existential problem that confronts our own individual mortality and vulnerability to unknown and unexpected events. And we all ask Why? Why these things happen. So I am going to do my best today to explain the answers the Bible gives – but we begin with some other responses.

As I have listened to the media and read some philosophical and religious responses I have heard four unsatisfactory responses that I want to touch on briefly.

1. The first one is from tourists who were still streaming into Phuket on New Year's Eve to begin their holidays. One Russian woman was quoted as saying "We are here on holiday, not to be sad, I know bad things have happened, but it's nothing to do with us." Not to be outdone, one Australian man was quoted as saying, "I heard what was going on with the wave and so on, and I just thought it was a bit of an exaggeration, so I didn't think too much about it." Now those sort of comments are wrong at so many levels, but especially so because there is a sense in which these people affected in our world are our neighbours who we ought to love and care for. The arrogance of

the individualism expressed in these comments is manifestly self-centred and anti-God. Instead, God's command is found in Galatians 6:10:

**Galatians 6:10** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

No matter where people are, no matter who they are. When people in our world face tragedy, Christian people need to be ready willing and able to respond. And so from this Sunday, I want to encourage people to be generous in your support of the effort to relieve this human tragedy. You can donate money through the Archbishop's Overseas Relief and Aid Fund at the rear of the building.

2. The second unsatisfactory response came from an Article titled "Is God to blame for this?" in the Melbourne Age. The article picked up on Romans 8:28 that says "God works for the good of those who love him" and suggested that the flipside must be true – God has the power to punish those who do not love the Lord. The writer went on to say that the people of SE Asia might have been chosen for this disaster because God regarded the Hindus of India, the Muslims of Indonesia and the Buddhists of Thailand as deserving of suffering. The problem with this is that it ignores the fact that many people of many religions have died, including Christians. It also ignores the fact that God does not operate like that – he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. In addition, at the purely philosophical or grammatical level there are many other statements that can be coupled with God works for the good of those who love him – we do not need to just assume that the polar opposite is naturally true.
3. The third unsatisfactory response has not been loudly proclaimed in the West yet but it has been in the background of several things I have heard because of its connection with some Eastern religions (eg. Hinduism). It is the response that assumes a connection between today's troubles and yesterday's wrongs. The why question receives an instant and all encompassing reply: "Because it is deserved". It is God getting you back for the wrong you have done. Now this is unsatisfactory first because it is difficult to see how something so broadly devastating and yet random in terms of who and what type of people died could be operating at such a specific level. But second, it is exactly this kind of thinking that Jesus rejects in Luke 13. He refers to an accident where 18 people died in a building tragedy and people assumed that these people were worse sinners than everyone else because of the accident. Jesus answers emphatically, "I tell you no!" That is not the way God works. Some call it Karma but either way it is not biblical nor of God.
4. Finally, the fourth unsatisfactory response was rolled out in a SMH article titled "Waves of destruction wash away belief in God's benevolence". I say rolled out because it is a very old challenge to biblical faith but perhaps the best of the unsatisfactory answers. The Bible teaches what that famous mealtime prayer says "God is great, God is good and we thank him for our food". David Hume, the famous anti-supernaturalist and sceptic of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century put the challenge to this succinctly when he wrote [in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*] "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is God able but not willing? Then he is malevolent (malicious). Is he both able and willing? Then he is evil."

It is a way of thinking that does challenge biblical faith and it is from here we spring off into looking at how the Bible helps us understand natural disasters and human suffering and what our response to David Hume might be. At a philosophical level, though, we need to recognise that Hume's conclusion is not the only reasonable conclusion to the conflict between God's power and goodness on the one hand and evil on the other. For it may well be that *God has loving reasons for permitting suffering*.

So then, how as Christians do we understand and respond to this disaster? Well, we can only say what the Bible says and the first thing is – we need to understand ourselves.

### **1. Understand ourselves**

God has created us humans are emotional, expressive, affective people. When things happen around us we are impacted – all in different ways. Some sit and cry. Some are just stunned. Some are angry. Some are disbelieving. Some are stoic. Sure some are arrogant and individualistic enough to ignore the situation; but the frailty and weakness of our humanity cries out to us at a time like this saying it could have been me; and why was it them. Why was it anyone?

And the first thing I want to say today is that it is OK to ask why. It is OK to question. It is OK to cry out to God in the face of suffering seeking answers. I think sometimes church people feel we must always be declaring “The LORD is my shepherd” even if the shepherd seems to have fallen asleep and the wolf is at the door. But biblical faith is not like that. Biblical faith is not a Pollyanna type belief. Where unrealistic optimism says everything will be OK. Biblical faith is not like Mary Poppins who sees the good in all and solves problems with trite answers that don’t make a lot of sense and sometimes even with lies.

The Bible never encourages us to deny reality. Encased within its pages are stories of enormous suffering from Job to the Israelites in Lamentations to Stephen who is stoned to death for trusting Jesus. The Scriptures are littered with stories of those who have suffered. These are not things to be ignored. Likewise biblical faith does not involve repeating a mantra or set of words designed to dispel doubts and convince our frail psyches that it will all be OK.

Evil and suffering are taken seriously in the Bible – there is no attempt to minimise its extent of trivialise its significance. There is no attempt to regard evil as anything but dark, menacingly ugly, heart rending and crushing.

And so it is right at a time like this we look to Jesus who is the author and perfecter of our faith. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that

(<sup>NIV</sup> Hebrews 4:15) we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are (Hebrews 2:18) AND he himself suffered.

And this same Jesus cries out at the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is a quote from Ps 22 – an urgent appeal for God to intervene. For Jesus it expresses the unfathomable pain of real abandonment by the Father.

And his cry can be our cry in the face of unfathomable pain. But it is still a cry to ‘My God’, our Father. What we have pictured for us here and in the Scriptures is faithful doubting. It is placing ourselves in God’s hands, sometimes with tears and with nothing but grief and asking why. Its OK.

What then is the response we hear. Well, the Scriptures tell us to understand our world.

### **2. Understanding our world – not as it is meant to be**

And in order to do that we need to go back to the beginning. For in the Garden of Eden we see life as it is meant to be.

Have a look with me at Genesis 2:8-25.

NIV Genesis 2:8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. <sup>9</sup> And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground-- trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. <sup>10</sup> A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. <sup>11</sup> The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. <sup>12</sup> (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) <sup>13</sup> The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. <sup>14</sup> The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. <sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; <sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." <sup>18</sup> The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." <sup>19</sup> Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. <sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup> The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." <sup>24</sup> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. <sup>25</sup> The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

It is the idyllic picture of creation that we see here. The physical environment is a flourishing haven, Adam and Eve are in perfect harmony with each other and God himself is close at hand and converses freely with them in the Garden. What we have before us is the world in all its beauty and majesty and perfection. There is environmental, social and spiritual harmony.

So what happened? This is not the way the world is now. Put simply, in Adam, the whole human race violated God's will and fell from the state of innocence and perfection God had created for us and given to us. This is what Paul explains when he says in Romans 5,

Romans 5:12 sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.

The consequences of Adam's action is that all of us now begin life with a natural tendency to sin and end life with death because of sin. But it is not only us who are affected by sin. The Bible tells us that accompanying sin was a radical change in the universe.

Have a look with me at Genesis 3:17-19.

NIV Genesis 3:17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. <sup>18</sup> It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

You see when humanity defied God, this had devastating consequences for the creation itself. The physical environment in which we live came under the same curse as us. It came under judgment like us. The earth itself bears the scars of the traumatic rift between us and God. It contains an ever present reminder that the Creator is not pleased with our defiance of him. From the DNA inside the human body to the tectonic plates under the earth's surface the physical world now contains a measure of frustration and chaos. Viruses mutate out of control, babies are born with abnormalities and earthquakes causes tsunamis that decimate the earth.

Now I love lookouts. Wherever we go on holidays, I am always keen to get to the highest point and look out over the earth and experience its beauty and power and majesty. So I am not saying here that there is nothing good on the earth. There is enough beauty and awesome scenery that I have viewed in my short life to assure you that the earth is wonderful and no fluke – but there is enough disorder in creation itself, for us all to hear the message loud and clear that this is not the way it is meant to be. "Natural disaster" is a constant warning and reminder of the curse humanity is under because of our rejection of God. (Why Jesus says repent!) It proclaims, this is not the way things are meant to be.

Now we don't just build this idea from Genesis but we see it in other places in God's word. Ecclesiastes expresses the frustration of living in a world that seems to go in cycles, some of which are destructive and all of which appear meaningless. The water, the wind and the sun all travel in cycles and circles trapped in endless patterns that never end. But it is Paul in Romans who picks up these ideas and makes them concrete for us.

Have a look with me at Romans 8:18-22.

NIV Romans 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup>The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

So what we have had this last week is another example of the creation groaning under the weight of decay and causing devastation.

Now as I explored these ideas a bit further, I came across reference after reference about the Sea. And I want to just as an aside share some of this with you briefly. For in the Bible, *the sea is a picture of unpredictability, power, challenge to God's creation and even to God himself.*

In Genesis 1:1-2 we find that the earth is covered with water and it is formless and void before God provides it with order through light and land and so on.

In Genesis 6 God "un-creates" the earth in some sense by covering it with sea.

In Exodus 14 God's people are almost destroyed as the sea becomes the barrier to their escape from the Egyptians but God drives the sea back from his people so they can survive by passing through it. The idea is then repeated throughout the Old Testament that God defeated the sea for his people. But also, that the enemies of God's people came from the sea.

Poetically, the sea represents the powerful unpredictability of the world we live in, yet it is under God's control.

Psalm 89:9 You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.

But likewise

Jeremiah 31:35 This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar-- the LORD Almighty is his name:

In the New Testament then, it ought to come as no surprise that we find Jesus calming the storm – on the sea. And that at the end of all time, there will be no sea (Rev 21:4).

Now the point of all that is not that we must not swim in the sea, live near the sea or enjoy the sea, it is just a reminder of our frailty and God's power. It is a reminder that we are not in control. A reminder that we live in a world under judgement and that makes it an unpredictable world. But in Jesus we have a reminder that this is not the way the world is meant to be and that God is not going to leave the world like this forever. Jesus calms the tumultuous sea and it is an indication that in sending Jesus, God has done something to solve the consequences of sin not only for us but for our world too. I will flesh this out in a moment but, this immediately raises a new question doesn't it.

It is the existential question for us with respect to the time we are in now. Why doesn't God intervene and stop things like this now – put out his hand and stop the tectonic plates moving.

Well, my words and thoughts were easily surpassed by those of John Dickson who writes

(If I were God I'd end all the pain. Matthias Media: Sydney, 2002, 45.)

'There are times when I wish God would bend human wills and the course of events. Not my will and not events that benefit me, just those that are bad – but in my more rational moments, as I think through the implications of this, it dawns on me that if God acted more like the executive producer of the TRUMAN SHOW we would have a real dilemma on our hands. We would not be here pondering "Why does God permit evil and suffering?" for there would be none, but we would be here asking the more tragic question "Why has God made us like this without a will and personal expression?" The point is of course purely hypothetical because God would not even allow us to think that. He would correct our thoughts and keep us in the dark, away from the real world, of risk, danger, pain and sorrow.'

But the reality is different. The Bible does not picture God as playing dolls-house with the world. We are real independent beings designed for relationship with Him and with each other. But because of

this we are also capable of defiance. We are able to say No to God and the consequences of this are all too plain.

Now the natural next question to John Dickson's thoughts is "Has God done *anything*? Does he care that people have, are and will suffer?" And the answer of course is yes he does. At his core, and from his core God loves us and he has shown us this love physically and tangibly in Christ. So finally friends I want us to understand our God.

### 3. Understanding our God

And we do that by returning to Christmas and pondering evil. For Christmas provides us with a unique contribution to the problem of evil. You see, the remarkable thing about God is that, while knowing that he himself was to become a victim of the evil resulting from sin, God allowed sin to occur anyway. The Bible tells us that God was grieved by the sinfulness of humanity (Gen 6:6) and while there is a measure of "God describing himself humanly so we can understand him" here, there nonetheless is indication that the sin of man is painful or hurtful to God. But even more to the point here is the babe born on the first Christmas. God always knew that Jesus would come to earth and be subject to numerous evils: hunger, fatigue, betrayal, ridicule, rejection, suffering and death. But he sent him regardless and He did this in order to defeat sin and all its composite evil effects. So God himself is a fellow-sufferer with us of the evil in this world and consequently is able to deliver us from evil. So anyone who would impugn the goodness of God for allowing sin and consequently evil must measure that charge against the teaching Scripture that God himself became the victim of sin so that he and we might be victors over evil.

Now that is not going to stop the pain. It is not going to bring back friends. It is not going to protect us from future suffering, but it provides us with perspective. Here in the present we live by faith in a context where God's good character is not always obvious. But faith is linked to hope which is the confidence that God will, one day, as he has before, prove just and kind.

That our 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 years give way to an eternity of peace with God and earth because God suffered for us. To the ears of Eastern religion that is gross heresy. But to the ears of those suffering it ought to be great comfort that this world is not the way it is meant to be and God has promised not to leave it like this forever, and in Christ has opened the door for us to experience it all anew. For that is the picture in Revelation 21:1-4.

Have a look with me at Revelation 21:1-4.

NIV Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup>I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup>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."

What a measure and promise of love this is!

Friends, there are lots more questions so let us continue to ask them. But most importantly, let us continue to come before our Father in prayer, casting our anxiety upon him, asking that His sustaining peace and strength be given to us, to those we love and to those in the midst of tragedy.

*I started with Psalm 77 and here is how it ends – with the one crying out recognising that though God's plans may seem far away, God himself is trustworthy and mighty to save.*

<sup>10</sup> Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High." <sup>11</sup> I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. <sup>12</sup> I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds. <sup>13</sup> Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? <sup>14</sup> You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. <sup>15</sup> With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. <sup>16</sup> The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. <sup>17</sup> The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder; your arrows flashed back and forth. <sup>18</sup> Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked. <sup>19</sup> Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. <sup>20</sup> You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.