

When Faith Is Tested

Psalm 46; Luke 10:25-37

2nd Sunday of Epiphany

17th January 2010

It is now some 5 days since the devastating earthquake hit Haiti. And it is still difficult to get our minds around the enormity of this event. As we have tried to process the constant stream of images on TV and in our newspapers – rescue workers desperately trying to get trapped people out of the rubble, grieving relatives besides the bodies of their loved ones, hungry crowds fighting for food – it has seemed like looking at Edvard Munch’s famous painting *The Scream*.¹ An ear-piercing shriek emanating from the dark night of so many souls, echoing with heart-rending force around the world.

Whenever such catastrophes strike, we instantly try to find some meaning in them. We can’t help but ask the question: Why? And there is no shortage in the media of possible reasons ventured for such an impossible-to-fathom event striking one of the poorest nations on earth. Religious leaders, especially, when natural disasters occur, are not slow to give their two cents worth on the underlying reasons. The only problem is that so often their explanations defy any sane rationality.

There are those evangelical Christians who see such an earthquake as a punishment, suggesting that God caused the disaster to chastise people who had ignored his warnings. Then there are those who see natural disasters as “birth pangs” leading up to the Rapture whereby “true” Christian believers will be swept up into heaven while others will be left behind to face the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

American televangelist Pat Robertson, especially, has views on the causes of natural disasters that beggar belief. Do you remember how some years ago he said that Orlando, Florida, would be targeted by a hurricane because people there displayed rainbow flags at a gay parade? This time, again, he has not failed to disappoint with his extreme views. On the 700 Club this past week, he made comments to the effect that the earthquake happened because the Haitian people were in league with the devil. In other words, they brought this disaster upon themselves.

There is an old legend in the country that says, centuries ago, Haitians, through their use of voodoo, employed the power of evil for national purposes. “[Robertson’s] comments,” says 700 Club spokesman, Chris Roslan, “were based on the widely discussed 1791 slave rebellion led by Boukman Dutty at Bois Caiman, where the slaves allegedly made a famous pact with the devil in exchange for victory over the French. This history, combined with the horrible state of the country, has led countless scholars and religious figures over the centuries to believe the country is cursed.”²

Now, I ask you, could anyone who truly believes in the Christian God as a God of love really think that that such a God would visit a devastating earthquake on the poorest of people on this earth? Where is Pat Robertson’s brain?

Where is his heart? How can he possibly offer that as rational explanation for what has happened this past week in Haiti?

It’s tempting, of course, to go to the opposite end of the scale and refuse to see any meaning whatsoever in this tragedy. It’s tempting to say that the issues are so complex that it’s best not to venture any observations at all. But, while no-one can give any definitive answers, there are some things we can and must say at a time like this.

We need, for instance, to be reminded of the scientific reasons for earthquakes occurring. Not just that they are the results of shifts in tectonic plates. But that these geological events happen because our planet is alive and brimming with latent energy. If this was not so, Earth would simply be a dead rock floating in space. A rock that could not sustain life. And so we would not be here.

Then, we must resist the temptation to draw a cause-and-effect line between natural disasters and God’s will. We cannot say that God micro-manages this planet and uses earthquake to punish errant people. Yes, the Old Testament constantly tells of a God of retribution, who chastises people for their moral wrongs with a multitude of plagues and natural disasters. But the New Testament supersedes this image of God with the God revealed in Jesus. A God of love. A God who could never cause a natural disaster because it would be a denial of his very Being.

This, of course, immediately begs the question: If God is a God of love why does he permit such catastrophes to take place in our world? There is a field of religious thought called Process Theology which does not see God as being omnipotent in the classical sense, seeking to change the world and events in it from the outside. Rather, God voluntarily limits his power to act absolutely or unilaterally in the world, preferring to work co-operatively in and with people from the inside, in an incarnational manner, for the redemption of all creation. In this way, God cannot instantly end oppression or evil or natural disasters but works in a relational fashion to enable and empower humankind to achieve those things themselves, thereby increasing their sense of responsibility for the world in which they live.

Could it be, therefore, that God has consciously decided not to intervene in our planetary affairs on a daily basis to solve all our problems? But, rather, like the wise parent who seeks to nurture independence and increase a sense of accountability in his children, he refuses to do everything for us. Instead, he invites us to be his co-workers building and rebuilding our home in space and to co-operate with him in developing better ways in which all peoples can live more safely, more peacefully and more prosperously on this planet.

One thing we do know, of course, from the resources of our Christian Faith, is that God suffers with us when such

disasters happen. God is not immune to what we human beings endure in this life. He experienced the pain when – in the person of his own baby son, Jesus – he was hunted by Herod’s hit-men and had to flee to Egypt.³ He experienced the pain when, in the person of Jesus as an adult, he was stalked and mocked ... and whipped and stripped ... and hung on a cross in the most cruel of deaths.⁴ So, though we don’t have many answers, we do know that God is with us in the trials and tribulations of this life. Which means that he was there on the streets of Port-au-Prince when the ground shook and the buildings collapsed. And he is there still with all who suffer the effects of this unimaginable catastrophe.

Do you remember the story of the father whose son died in a car crash? The man’s faith was so tested that he stormed into church the next Sunday and confronted the parish priest during the service with the heart-rending question: “Where was your God when my son suffered and died this week?” And the priest answered quietly, “He was exactly where he was when his own son suffered and died. He was right there with him on the Cross.”

So, whatever difficult questions might perplex us as we contemplate this disastrous earthquake, let us take comfort in knowing that God is where he always is during these times. With his suffering people. At their side to comfort and strengthen them. As the Psalmist says, “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.”⁵

Although we don’t have all the answers at a time such as this, although we are almost numbed and paralysed by the dimensions of this disaster, nevertheless it doesn’t mean that we do nothing. Far from it! As Christians we are called to respond. We are called to adopt the role of the Good Samaritan. We are called to reach out and help.

Often when some tragedy happens, the words that come readily to our lips are, “There but for the grace of God, go I” as we realise how someone else’s misfortune could so easily be our own. “There but for the grace of God, go I ... I could have been born in Haiti. I could have been working there as many Canadians were. I could have been a missionary there. I could have been serving with the United Nations peace-keepers. I could have been a nurse there.”

The “but for the grace of God” part, though, can be troubling because it carries with it the inference of a division between the blessed and the unblessed, those to whom God acts graciously and those who are denied his grace. Not only can we be tempted to think, “Thank goodness, it wasn’t me caught up in that tragedy” but, also, “Thank goodness, I am not like those people.” And when that attitude takes hold then, unfortunately, it allows us to distance ourselves from those in need and convince ourselves that we don’t really need to do anything to help.

Wasn’t that the attitude of the priest and the Levite in our parable this morning when they saw the poor man lying, injured and bleeding at the side of the road?⁶ “There but for the grace of God, go I,” they said, thinking: “This man is different from me. I am blessed, he is unblessed so I don’t really need to help. By the grace of God, therefore, I am excused from responsibility.” So they passed by on the other side.

The Good Samaritan, on the other hand, probably also said, “There but for the grace of God go I” when he saw the poor fellow who had been assaulted by the robber. But he did not use this as a pretext to absolve himself from the need to offer help. On the contrary, these words spurred him to action because he said to himself, “By the grace of God, I have been spared so that I can help this suffering man all the more.”

At this time of tragedy in Haiti, we Christians are called to do what that man did so long ago. We are called to be Good Samaritans. Obviously, we cannot travel to that country personally and bind up the wounds of the suffering. But, with our gifts of money, we can enable those who are there to act on our behalf. Our Presbyterian World Service and Development⁷ has for many years been working in Haiti through a large global alliance of Christian Aid agencies called ACTS – the Action of Churches Together. They have personnel on the ground there who swung into action immediately after the earthquake struck and they are concentrating their efforts at the moment in the areas of water purification, sanitation needs as well as providing psycho-social workers experienced in trauma counselling.⁸

The task facing the humanitarian agencies in Haiti is one of the most challenging in modern times. There is much to be done. Much suffering to be relieved. Much relief to be distributed. Much reconstruction to be undertaken. So much that it can seem overwhelming. But it can be done if we – and other people of compassion and concern – reach out as Good Samaritans and give generously as we are so often wont to do.

God bless you as you consider your gifts to the Earthquake Relief Fund! God bless the people of Haiti!

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¹ Edvard Munch, *The Scream, The Scream* (Norwegian: *Skrik*; created 1893-1910) is the title of expressionist paintings and prints in a series by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, depicting an agonised figure against a blood red sky. The landscape in the background is Oslofjord, viewed from the hill of Ekeberg, in Oslo (then Kristiania), Norway. Cf. www.wikipedia.org

² Russell Goldman, “Pat Robertson’s Haiti Comments Shed Light on Country’s Religion, Voodoo”, ABC News, January 14, 2010

³ Matthew 2:13ff

⁴ Luke 23:1ff

⁵ Psalm 46:1

⁶ Luke 10:25-37

⁷ Presbyterian World Service and Development, The Presbyterian Church in Canada <http://www.presbyterian.ca/pwsd>

⁸ Haiti: Port-au-Prince Looks Like a War Zone, ACT

International, January 14, 2010,

<http://act-intl.org/news.php?uid=799>