

Sermon – 24<sup>th</sup> Jan 2010

*May I speak in the name of God who is creating, liberating and sustaining us. Amen*

Last week, I was accosted outside school by a friend whose eyes were popping out with rage. She had heard a radio interview about the earthquake in Haiti - a senior cleric had been asked why God had let it happen.

My friend was upset and infuriated because she felt that the bishop had tried to *explain away* the disaster in theological terms. 'Some waffle about how Jesus saves' were her words. She was not convinced at all.

And if any of you read the Church Times, you may have seen Giles Fraser's column in which he attacks another attempt to explain things away – this time by blaming it on the Haitians.

Apparently one American TV evangelist is seriously suggesting that the Haitians made a pact with the devil and this is their punishment. Unbelievable, disgusting, but true.

Perhaps you have heard other church leaders this week struggling to find words to respond to this enormous disaster: trying to defend belief in an all powerful, all loving, all knowing God in the face of such tragedy. *How could a loving, all powerful God allow this terrible thing to happen?*

The attempt to explain the existence of God in the face of evil is what is known as theodicy. And when we are faced with Haiti, just as in months gone by we have been faced with the Boxing Day Tsunami or the Twin Towers on 9/11, people want to know what we Christians think. Many people may want to say 'Ha – where is your God now? You can't seriously believe this stuff in the face of this kind of reality'. What can we say to that?

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Of course, the problem of evil is not new. And neither are the various theories that have been put forward to explain it.

The classic argument is that God made a deliberate choice to limit God's power so that we humans could have free will and take the consequences of our actions. God's choice to step back allows us freedom and the evil in the world is a consequence of our bad decisions.

This argument addresses the evil caused by human beings. But it doesn't really address natural disasters. What about the Tsunami? Or on a smaller, but no less significant scale, what about the death of a child through cancer? The idea that God might need to limit God's power for our freedom doesn't really make much sense in these contexts.

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One thinker to address this in the 1700s was Leibniz. He argued that because God is all good, all powerful, and *chose to create this world* out of all possible worlds, this *must be the best of all possible worlds*.

But this raises the obvious question – should God have bothered? If the best possible world looked like this one, perhaps God should not have created at all.

This was Dostoevsky's point in his novel '*The Brothers Karamazov*' when the character Ivan says that as far as he's concerned God has got it wrong - the whole world is not worth the death of a single child.

Arguing that this is the *best possible world* on logical grounds *does* cause problems when faced with the lived reality of suffering.

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If we move to more recent times, some people try to explain natural disasters by pointing to their necessity in *physical terms*.

For example, I've heard it said that it is necessary for there to be tectonic plates on the earth and necessary to the physical structures and processes of the earth that these move and therefore *there need to be earthquakes* - they are part of the wonder of the system God has created.

This may make sense on a macro level. But it does not help us to make sense of the consequences *for individuals* of an earthquake. Are all those deaths just *collateral damage* in the eyes of God? Deliberating creating a world like this doesn't sound much like the act of a Creator who knows every hair on our head and loves us all as children.

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In the Old Testament book of Job, we are given a different approach to consider.

In that book, Job is struck down by terrible afflictions for no just cause. He pleads his innocence, but his misfortunes continue to get worse and worse. His 'Comforters' come and give easy explanations for his suffering – which are all misplaced and unjust to Job. But Job continues to protest his innocence calling on God to explain what has happened.

When God finally appears in the book to answer Job's charges, God does not answer the question at all. God does not address theodicy. God simply says (at some length). *'Did you make all the wonders of the earth? No – the marvels of the earth are my business - don't try to understand my ways- they are beyond your ken!'*

The book of Job gives us to understand that there is indeed *innocent* suffering in the world. But that we cannot hope to understand why. And that at some level it is *proud and foolish* to seek to do so.

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So then, in the face of the sort of suffering we've seen on our TV screens this week, I have most sympathy with the commentators who follow Job and own up to our necessary ignorance in these matters.

Giles Fraser for example said straight out *'I have no answer to why God allows so many to die in natural disasters'* and that really has to be our honest answer here.

In Rowan Williams' little book about September 11<sup>th</sup>, *'Writing in the dust'*, he describes how useless his words felt when faced with such incomprehensible tragedy.

*'The morning after, very early, I was stopped in the street in New York by a youngish man...who wanted to know what the hell God was doing when the planes hit the Towers.*

*What do you say? The usual fumbling about how God doesn't intervene, which sounds like a lame apology for some kind of policy on God's part, a policy exposed as heartless in the face of such suffering?*

*Something about how God is there in the sacrificial work of the rescuers, in the risks they take?*

*I tried saying bits of this, but there was no clearer answer than there ever is'*

He goes on to say that there is a void which opens up in the face of such suffering: a void that is full of fear and uncertainty. All too often we find this void unbearable and fill it up with theories that try to make sense of things - whether it's an abstract philosophical theory or an attempt to apportion blame. We cannot bear to face the void. We have to *insist* on things being well - even though they are by no means well.

Rowan Williams suggests that instead of filling up the void with explanations that suit our own agenda – we really need to do is to learn *to live with the void* – and to seek God in the presence of that void.

To seek God in and through the void, means to *abandon* comforting attempts to explain things away and instead to enter the dark place where God is. Entering into the experience of God, waiting on God in prayer, offers us the chance to discover God anew. But it may also challenge our received ways of thinking and speaking of God.

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Let me share some of the thoughts that have surfaced in my reflections on this over the past couple of days.

I have wondered why we choose to picture God as ultimately powerful and controlling in our religious language using images that suggest God should be imposing solutions on us when we know God does not act like that? Why do we allow metaphors of God as Lord, King, Almighty Father to dominate our liturgies?

In any case do those images fully convey our human experience of Love? What about images of God as a good mother? Images of nurture, of being comforted, of dependability or of inter-dependency even. Wouldn't they help us to face this void more honestly?

Surely these maternal characteristics are more like our experience of God in times of crisis and our everyday images of a male ruler or patriarchal father figure tend to leave us feeling abandoned and confused at times like these?

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There are many questions then and no clear answers when we try to live honestly holding together the reality of God and the reality of our experience.

But the strange thing is that the intellectual difficulties do not seem to put people off religion. In fact, if anything, suffering often seems to draw people towards the Christian faith.

I think that's because for many people being a Christian is not about finding the perfect answer to a philosophical question. It's about living with the difficulties life throws at us - finding the path that helps us to thrive as human beings. Christian faith is not like understanding a complicated argument or logical conundrum. It is about trying to live out our lives in accordance with Jesus' teaching and example.

At the end of Voltaire's exploration of theodicy in his novel *Candide*, where the characters suffer outrageous misfortune and engage in constant philosophical debates about the cause of their misery, *Candide* concludes simply '*We must cultivate our garden*'.

In other words, endless philosophical discourse is all very well, but in the end the key thing is *to know how to live*. The Christian truths about life and living are what really count.

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So let us turn very briefly to our Gospel text for today Luke 4 :14f.

Jesus returns home after his temptations in the wilderness and filled with the Holy Spirit he goes to the synagogue. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me  
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind  
To let the oppressed go free  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*

This is a text of liberation. It tells us what Jesus is all about. It proclaims his Gospel of freedom and justice for all. It is a text that has been used by impoverished communities of South America - to bring hope and to challenge the spiritual and material dominance of the powers that be.

This Gospel text is the heart of the matter for Christians. It works to liberate people across the world. *And* it liberates us.

For as Followers of Jesus, we share in Jesus' mission to be bearers of good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and restore sight to those who are in darkness.

And as followers of this 'Way', sharing in that Gospel of Liberation, we find *ourselves* freed. We may not have a convincing theoretical response to the problem of evil – to why disasters like Haiti happen. But we know how we are meant to respond.

God grant us the courage to follow in that Way.

Amen