

Concerning natural disasters

The recent tsunami has generated much silly thinking. There are no complete answers, but it is useful to clarify issues. *Scale does not make a difference*. All the issues raised by this event exist whenever one person is struck by lightning. The Old Testament discusses the issue in terms of relatively small numbers of casualties in the book of Job (and some of that suffering is caused by human action rather than natural causes). The Lord thinks of relatively small numbers involved in the fall of a tower (treated, it seems, as a natural event rather than a case of human neglect or incompetence).

We have learned nothing new. The case against God, if such there be, is unchanged by this new instance. Maybe our eyes have been opened; but that tells of our neglect in facing the evidence before, not of some new discovery.

In fact, this is not even a pure instance of the natural disaster. Man had the ability to detect the earthquake and to give warning of the likely waves. In other parts of the world, such mechanisms were in place. There is an element of human neglect in that suffering could have been not indeed eliminated but certainly reduced.

It should go without saying that we accept the Lord's warning: *such events must not be seen as God's punishment for sin in the individual victims* (or, probably, anybody else). Many of the victims were, by the standards of comparative human sin, innocent.

We assert, with scripture, that God made the world good. But this is not the good of Greek philosophy, which would expect some abstract perfection. If the earth were good in that way, it would be all alike, utterly homogenous, utterly static. There would be no land. If the universe were good in that way, there would be no stars or planets. Indeed, science suggests that the end of the universe might be thought of in those terms - all equally hot (or cold) and therefore *nothing capable of happening*.

God's good is of a different kind - and not a paradoxical meaning of the word. The universe, the earth and human life are good because of *differentiation* - because things can and do happen. That life exists is one of the consequences.

Within this sort of good world, *there is nothing without risk*. All living things respond to risk; human beings indeed manage risk. I doubt life is possible without risk.

It may seem odd - even horrible - to hark back to "the best of all possible worlds" in such a context, but the analysis is not utterly mistaken. Too much differentiation, too much risk, and life is unlikely to sustain itself and develop. Too little and the same is true. It may not be a sound argument from these facts to divine providence (or the modern variant, "intelligent design"), and I do not attempt that argument. I am not trying to prove from the world that God exists. I simply suggest that even small changes in the facts about this planet would make human life unsustainable, possibly all life. This may not *quite* be the best of all possible worlds for us *as we are*, but it cannot be *very* far from it or we would not be here at all. "Had I been present at the creation of the world, I would have spared the creator some absurdities." No you would not; you would have caused some.

We Christians believe that there is a sense in which both we and the world are "fallen". Such a fall is not about guilt (which is a different analysis and only applies to human beings and other creatures capable of sin; *the world itself is not capable of sin and therefore cannot have guilt or be punished*). The fall is about *damaged goods*, and it is of the essence of such an analysis that we have some idea of what the undamaged goods would be like. It may be that some features of the world can be understood in this way, but I am reluctant to take this too far because it is hard to differentiate between damage and what is inherent in any created order capable of life.

Would we care about the event if there had been no human casualties? (The satirist will perhaps call in aid "Volcanoes have a fury that is grim" and the rest from the Mikado - and are we, or should we be, revolted at the drama of nature in itself? Perhaps not.)

It is wise to consider whether there is some sort of mistake involved in blaming God or putting him on trial. This is perhaps implied by the book of Job. However tempting it may be to do this, *we do not have the information or the ability to be just* in such a case. As Pope put it: "Go teach eternal wisdom how to rule, Then drop into thyself and be a fool". The Day of Judgement will be the other way round!

It is a foolish practice to blame God. If there is no God, then there is nothing to blame and indeed nothing good or bad can have happened. If God is even remotely as Christians (and some others) believe, then *one cannot simultaneously blame and worship*. All one can do if one decides God is "guilty" is to *reject the relationship* - decide that though God exists I will either take no notice of him or act against his wishes. This is not an incoherent stance, but it does not seem to be a very common one.

A lot of the blame seems to assume that we have a *right to life and to be happy*, and therefore God has a duty to provide these. This is folly. How could such a right be established? This line of argument means that God is subordinate to some other authority to which he owes a duty - in which case he is not the Christian (or Jewish, or Mohammedan) God. Or is he to be subordinate to us? We do not have a right to life; we will certainly die and we may die young. We do not have a right to be happy; nobody, not even God I suspect, can contrive happiness for somebody else.

Is the suggestion that God (or at least his followers for him) makes promises which he does not, perhaps cannot, keep? There has certainly been no promise of avoiding either death or suffering - as the Lord himself experienced. Those who preach a "prosperity gospel" should examine themselves - but in the light of the Crucifixion, not the recent disaster. Certainly bad theology should be exposed for what it is.

We need to consider the topic of providences, dispensations and miracles (note how Christians of the past had a much richer vocabulary than we do and might be correspondingly careful). If we view a miracle as something inconsistent with the normal regularities of the universe (and if we believe that we know what these are!) then we open the question whether God can and does work miracles.

It follows from God being sovereign over the universe which he created that he can. However, from the necessities of a good creation, as already discussed, God cannot often alter its normal regularities without destroying features essential to that goodness. Indeed, it is essential to the being of a miracle that such events are rare. If God continuously had to intervene (and did so), we would conclude that the creation was not good. Maybe our casual talk of "laws" (as if the path of every atom were determined) is a confusion; maybe God can manage random probabilities, chaos and turbulence to achieve some particular purposes. But even if so, we have already remembered that not all disasters punish the guilty and that nobody, not even Christ himself, has a promise of protection.

There are some who marvel that they survived when so many did not, and wish to thank God. It is hard to forbid them, provided they do not imagine that they were worthy in a way others were not.

Of course we do not belittle the grief of survivors and relatives. It is a well-established duty of religion to comfort the mourners and to assist those in need. And religion - any religion - has something to offer to those who share in it. At the very least, there is a ritual available to be performed. The dead can be buried. There is hope. God can bring his healing even through false religions.

But for those who live without God in this world, these deaths are meaningless and there is no hiding the fact. There is no ritual available. Silence (of whatever duration) is exactly what they have chosen. And that silence is empty.

The Rev'd Michael Gray

My resolve to write about the glories of our common faith is often overtaken by events: in the last newsletter by the monstrosity in Beslan, now by the devastation from the tsunami. The churches' response has been misrepresented, yet their reactions came across as disordered. As the devastation comprehends a multi-faith world our difficulty is increased. One cannot honestly proclaim the Christian hope to Muslims and others, nor is it culturally sensitive. And yet the human condition is the concern of Christians. The very purpose of our Blessed Lord taking our "manhood into God" was to embrace and transform humanity. God in Christ took our frailty, pain, anguish and even death through His Incarnation.

Our faith is plainly that, not a philosophy. We are forever banging our heads against the brick wall of the so-called "problem of evil" demanding answers to some supposed quest. But it is not answers that we should be seeking but God Himself. Events such as this are reminders that we are creatures in the same transitory life as the other elements of the earth: those very elements that are in such grim flux. Our response should not be anodyne words but a cry of repentance, a turning to God.

Repentance! not because these thousands have been specifically punished (Luke 13:2-5) but because this is the response that our Lord commands at such times (ibid.). It is an imperfect or "fallen" world, every reminder of our mortality, however demoralising and seemingly disproportionate, has to be met with humility and sorrow, but also hope in the Saviour of the world.

There is nothing new to say, no fresh insight, no inventive spin. Rather we must remember what our faith has taught us and turn to the words and deeds of our Blessed Lord. After this we should turn to the deeds of those who, rather than wringing their hands, are making a difference by despatching aid and supplies. We may support them with prayers, time and money (but not goods!). We pray especially for those who are attempting to recover and catalogue the dead. If any single factor would sap one's belief, this would be it. But instinctive revulsion should not be confused with philosophical insight. God is not only Creator but re-Creator; here is the significance of Theophany, the muddy river reveals the well-spring of eternal life (John 4:14).

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