

If I were God... I'd have stopped the Tsunami Christ Church @ The Pilgrim

It's not easy to imagine what a crowd of 300,000 people looks like. If the crowd that filled Anfield football stadium this week for the Champions League semi-final against Chelsea had six more stadiums full in a row through north Liverpool you'd still be 2297 people short. We'll never know exactly how many people died on December 26th in South Asia but 300,000 is about as close an estimate as we're likely to get. It's hard to know which of the many heartbreaking aspects of what happened is the worst...

- The fact that it happened on Boxing Day as we all sat around at home mulling over the prospect of stuffing our faces with cold turkey and boxes of chocolates.
- The fact that the majority of the victims were women and children – too slow or too young to run to safety.
- The fact that total Western aid to the victims is the equivalent of less than 1 month's spending on fighting the war in Iraq.

Predictably it wasn't long before prominent figures, both in the region and among western commentators, started asking questions about God's role in the Tsunami. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury got involved. It was widely reported that he said such events made him question his own belief in God. Whilst that undoubtedly made good newspaper headlines it didn't bear much resemblance to what he actually said! What he really said was that it would be surprising if events like the Tsunami didn't make people ask questions about what God is like.

Of course for lots of people the Tsunami, or any other disaster, whether man made or "natural" shouldn't really be a problem – at least not at a philosophical or theological level. After all if you don't believe in the existence of God then all you can really say about a Tsunami is that molecules bounce. Oxford professor of Chemistry Peter Atkins, one of Britain's better know atheists, has out it like this:

"I've always thought that I was insignificant. Getting to know the size of the Universe, I see just how insignificant I really am! And I think the rest of the human race ought to realize just how insignificant it is. I mean, we're just a bit of slime on a planet belonging to one sun."

His even more famous colleague, the atheist biologist Richard Dawkins says:

"We should not think there's anything special about us. We used to think we were the centre of the Universe and now we know we're not."

From their point of view there's nothing more ultimately significant about the death or life of a human being than there is about the water molecules in a tsunami. Of course that doesn't solve the problem of suffering – it just means that there are no answers and we should get used to it. Which isn't, in my view, a very satisfactory answer to a question that human beings have asked since the dawn of history.

But Atkins, Dawkins and their friends aren't the only people who can deal, philosophically speaking, with disasters quite easily. All sorts of people who believe in God can deal with it too. I was chatting to a student a while back who had lost a baby sister to cot death syndrome. She had found a way of reconciling her belief in God with that event by simply coming to the conclusion that God wasn't in control that night.

And that provides an answer of sorts doesn't it? If God would love to stop suffering but simply doesn't have the power then we can understand why bad stuff happens.

Alternatively of course if we believe that God is not good but spiteful, capricious, even evil then there's no reason to question his existence in the face of a tragedy that kills 20, 200 or 2,000 people. Even something like the 1918 flu pandemic that killed 100 million people is easily explained if God is not good.

Tsunami, earthquakes, floods and pestilence are only a problem if you believe that God exists and that he is both powerful and loving. Thinker John Hick summed it up like this:

"If God is perfectly loving and good he must wish to abolish evil or suffering. If God is all powerful he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists, therefore God cannot be both perfectly good and almighty."

You can't have it both ways. Either your god is all powerful but he's not all loving. Or he's all loving but not all powerful. Or he simply doesn't exist.

The trouble is that in the one place in the world where God reveals himself most clearly

to human beings – the Bible – God insists that he is both all powerful and that he is perfectly good. And that is what we need to explore for a few minutes together if we are to come anywhere near an answer to the question of why God would allow an event like the recent tsunami.

1 God is all powerful

One of the most famous books about suffering is called *When bad things happen to good people*, by a Rabbi named Harold Kushner. He reaches the conclusion that what God really wants is for righteous people, good people “to live peaceful happy lives”. But sadly, Kushner says, “sometimes even he can't bring that about. It is too difficult for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.”

For my money Kushner is really far too optimistic – because, let's face it, it's not just sometimes that ordinary, decent type people are unhappy or without peace – it's an awful lot of the time for an awful lot of people.

The trouble with this approach though is that the Bible makes it quite clear, in hundreds of different places, that God is in complete control and that there is nothing God cannot do or prevent.

Let me give you just two examples.

In Genesis 1, the very first sentences of the Bible, we learn that with nothing more than a few words God can create light, earth, seas, sun, moon and stars. Are we seriously to believe that the God the Bible tells us, in a throwaway line, also made the stars, is not capable of stopping what is, relatively, a few small ripples on the surface of one ocean on one planet?

Perhaps even more strikingly of all in the book of Isaiah God speaks to a pagan king who does not acknowledge his rule and makes it utterly clear that he is all powerful: *I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.* Ah, that's it then, we've got you! If God brings disaster as well as prosperity surely that must mean that God isn't really good?

Well no. Because you simply can't get away from the fact that the Bible insists that God is perfectly good...

2 God is perfectly good

Good and upright is the Lord (Ps 25:8).

You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you (Ps 86:5).

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations (Ps 100:5).

And in fact Jesus goes so far as to say that...
...“there is only One who is good.”

God's goodness in the Bible includes both his love and his justice. And as well as the biblical evidence there are millions of Christians around the world, some of whom have suffered very greatly, who would readily testify to the goodness of God. So the Bible insists that God is all powerful AND that God is perfectly good. And yet the Bible is also very realistic and makes it clear that...

3 Evil and suffering are realities

Unlike some of the world's religions, notably Buddhism, the Bible doesn't try and get God off the hook by pretending that really, underneath the surface, life is actually all-right and that suffering is just an illusion.

The Bible faces up to the reality of evil straight on – a whole book, the book of Job, is devoted to telling the story of the suffering of the most upright and good man in the world.

The central event of the whole 1,300 page book is the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross – betrayed by a supposed friend, arrested by jealous religious lunatics and convicted by a cowardly judge.

So the Bible's view of the world we live in is that all these three things are true:

God is all powerful

God is entirely good

Evil and suffering are realities.

On the whole it has to be said that the Bible is not very interested in giving us a fully formed, neat philosophical argument that ties down exactly how it is that all of these things can be true. And there is no one killer passage in the Bible that sets it all out for us plainly and simply in words of one syllable.

So I would be very surprised if any of us went away from here tonight thinking that we've got this question of God and suffering all boxed off – in fact I hope you won't go away thinking that because if you do it suggests you haven't really grasped the immensity of the issues we're talking about.

But that doesn't mean there are no answers. Because the whole story line of the Bible and the things that Jesus said help us to understand how it can be that God is both powerful and good and yet our world experiences suffering.

And there are two things I'd like us to understand this evening that I hope will give us some insight into all this:

1 God's goodness means our world is full of death

Death is terrible. And it is universal. And it is God's doing. God brought death into the world as his just judgment on human beings for our utter self-centredness.

From the very beginning human beings have ignored and rejected God. Not one of us has kept the two most basic and simple moral laws in the universe – love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.

As the Bible puts it: *"there is no one who does good; no not one."*

And *because* God is good. Because he is just. Because he is righteous he cannot let our wickedness go unpunished. Death is his right judgment on all of us.

So why do we rage against God when events like the Asian tsunami happen?

The great Christian thinker C S Lewis was asked, at the beginning of World War II to speak to university students in Oxford about the war. And in his sermon he got, I think, to the heart of our problem with sudden and violent death and suffering. This is what he said:

We contrast [violent death] with an abstraction called life. But there is no question of death or life for any of us. Only a question of this death or of that. Of a machine gun bullet now or of cancer 40 years later. What does war do to death? It certainly doesn't make it more frequent. 100% of us die and the percentage cannot be increased. It puts some death earlier, but I hardly suppose that that is what we fear; certainly when the moment comes it will make little difference how many years we have behind us. Does it increase our chances of a painful death? I doubt it. As far as I can tell what we call natural death is usually preceded by suffering and a battlefield is one of the few places where one has a reasonable chance of dying with no pain at all. Does it

decrease our chances of dying at peace with God? I can't believe that either. If military services does not persuade a man to prepare for death what conceivable circumstances would?

Yet war does do something to death. It forces us to remember it. The only reason why the cancer at 60 does not bother us is that we forget it. War makes death real to us.

And is it not exactly the same with bombs and tsunami and earthquakes and planes crashes?

These things bring home to us the reality that we would rather forget. That we live in a world under God's judgment because of our deliberate rejection of its good and loving creator.

When a loved one dies we rightly feel loss and grief and pain. But very often, at least for me, when tragedies strike around the world my sorrow is not for others – at least not entirely. It is sorrow for my own mortality.

We hate these things because they remind us of what we would choose to forget – that we too will face death.

And in his justice God does not want us to forget that. He wants us to know that one day we will have to face our maker. And that on our own merits we will be found wanting.

But God does not want us to know that so that we can be overwhelmed and despairing because of our own inadequacies.

Rather he wants us to come to realise that...

2 God's goodness means there is a way to escape death

The Lord Jesus often brought people face to face with difficult realities – in order to bring hope.

You can see this particularly clearly in relation to the issue of suffering in a little incident recorded for us in Luke's biography of Jesus.

Luke 13:1-5. Notice what Jesus doesn't say about these events.

Firstly he doesn't say that these people were particularly bad. Do you think they were worse sinner? Do you think they were more guilty? I tell you no.

But also he doesn't say "what a terrible thing to happen to such nice people."

If you wanted to sum it up in other words Jesus says something like:

The sin of these people who died in disasters was not extraordinarily horrible. It was just normally horrible. It was ordinary sin; just like yours.

Jesus doesn't say: "those people who died didn't deserve it."

He says: "unless you repent you too will all perish."

In other words **from Jesus perspective we all deserve to die.**

Our assumption is that basically people are good and they deserve to live. But Jesus turns that assumption on its head. Jesus says that we are rebellious people who deserve to die.

Now you may find that difficult to accept. And I respect that – I have found it difficult to accept in the past too. But I can honestly say to you that you will never understand the Bible's answer to the problem of suffering unless you accept Jesus' diagnosis of the human heart.

You see having made it clear that **all of us deserve to die**, Jesus then tells us how we can live:

Unless you repent you too will all perish.

In other words if you repent, if you recognise your failure to love God and love your neighbour and turn back to God... well then you will not perish.

And the whole story of the Bible is focussed on showing how Jesus came and died to make it possible for us to turn back to God.

Now of course people who are Christians still suffer don't they? There were Christians in the tsunami, Christian in the World Trade Centre. Christians in Iraq – on both sides. Christians still get run over. They still die in train crashes. They still have heart attacks.

So when he says that those who repent will not perish he is not saying they will never grow old, have heart attacks and die. Jesus is thinking in eternal terms. Jesus is saying that anyone can face death with confidence if they love and trust him.

That is not to make light of the reality of pain and suffering. I am not pretending for a minute that the Tsunami and its aftermath is

nor painful and horrible. I am not saying that the a thousand tragedies, major and minor that take place every hour in our world are trivial.

But the problem of suffering won't go away just because we bury our heads in the sand. Jesus Christ offers real answers and real hope in the face of suffering. But he also insists that the presence of death in our world is a mark of God's goodness as he expresses his justice in judgment at our rebellion and wickedness.

Jesus is clear that all human beings have evil in our hearts. When disasters happen in our world it is not right for us to blame God for his unfair treatment of us.

What we should do is recognise that God has restrained his justice – which would see us all judged with death right now – and that he is patient with us, because he desires that more and more people should repent and trust in Jesus.

*Andrew Evans
May 2005*