

## Sermon for Epiphany 2

Monday, 18 January 2010

A sermon preached by the chaplain on some reflections on the tragedy in Haiti

Whenever a tragedy on the scale of the earthquake in Haiti occurs, it is inevitable that we ask ourselves the age old question of how God can allow such suffering to happen to innocent people.

We have heard many such opinions of late, and I am sorry to say that the opinions of religious people on these occasions tend to be not just embarrassing but appalling. Pat Robertson's claim that the people of Haiti entered into a pact with the devil to kick out Napoleon III is one of the worst; those, who regard human beings as full of sin tend to claim it is a punishment from God, as the Dean of Sydney claimed with regard to the Tsunami 5 years ago; or the Muslim scholar who said that we are all going to die anyway, so what does it matter, kind of thing, are enough to put you off religion for life. However we should not be put off by the extremes. I say that as a challenge to myself to come up with something more coherent.

Let us look back a bit historically first before we return to Haiti and in particular to 1755, when Lisbon was hit by an earthquake and tidal wave destroying up to 100,000 people, rather similar to Haiti. It was one of the most significant events in European cultural history, as it led to similar questionings about the existence of God and brought forward the onset of the European Enlightenment. Why Lisbon, asked Voltaire before producing four years later one of the seminal works of the Enlightenment, *Candide* which ridiculed Christianity in general and Leibniz's attempt to answer the question of suffering by saying we lived in the best of all possible worlds that was open to God. For many Lisbon and Voltaire argued incontestably that therefore God could not exist for a loving God could not have allowed Lisbon to happen.

But is this therefore the end of the argument - the same argument which appeared 5 years ago in the wake of the Tsunami and now in the wake of Haiti. These were not of course the first such terrible disasters nor is the reaction particularly modern.

We need to go further back to the Old Testament and the history of our faith. The history of the Old Testament could be seen as the history of the question of innocent suffering. What happened was this: during the history of the Israelites disasters kept happening - the country situated where it was was constantly invaded and overrun by competing empires, the worst event of which was the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century, and as the chosen people they had difficulty understanding these disasters. If you read the prophets you can see a progression: at first they were explained as punishment for sin - the Jews had not kept the covenant, so God punished them. But as time went by this argument no longer convinced, so the psalmist could sing: why has this befallen us even though we have not sinned and the psalmist elsewhere complains of God's silence and absence. There were two answers to this dilemma, one in the book of Job which confronts the question head on, to which the answer is, the universe is bigger than you can understand; and secondly they produced a new and radical answer to this injustice and silence - God would send a new King David to retake the kingdom and restore the fortunes of Israel. This was the expectation of the Messiah. The Jews delayed the moment of restored justice to a future kingdom as in fact Christians then did themselves, as one of the frequent answers to the question of injustice and innocent suffering is to say, in the next life the injustices of this world will be made good. Christians of course believe the Messiah was Jesus, but his kingdom was one of the heart and mind not a political kingdom.

It was precisely this putting-off-until-the-next-life that Karl Marx criticised, and his Communist Manifesto can be seen as the ancient Jewish hope of those day of justice appearing in this world through the overcoming of economic history by the dictatorship of the proletariat. I rather think Marx misunderstood Christianity, however trenchant his criticisms, however.

None of these answers seem to do for us today of course but the process of what happened to the Israelites is what counts. Every time a disaster happened they were confronted by this dilemma: it didn't fit in with their view of God, so they either had to stop believing in God or else come to a new understanding of God. This is in the end what we have to do. If you think about it, we do this all the time in our personal lives. We no longer believe in a Santa Claus type of God

who makes everything right for us. We are confronted by this question when a loved one dies or some other incomprehensible event of injustice. We have either to abandon faith - sadly what too many people do - or say to ourselves, I must have misunderstood what God is and then attempt to delve deeper and understand more fully.

So let's delve a little deeper.

I think our God is too dualistic : God is good so all the bad things can't have anything to do with him. Yet theologically this is not possible nor do I think this is how we have experienced God. The God of both Old and New Testaments is encountered in both the beauty of creation and in its terror, in death and resurrection, in suffering and transfiguration, in fire and water, in other words in creation and destruction. When we speak of God as a loving father we are using imagery, which is in itself incomplete and partial as all religious language is. I don't personally believe God is the kind of God who is a kind of very powerful nice human being up there somewhere who either does or does not make earthquakes happen. Earthquakes happen for known scientific reasons. Why did God create a world in which they can happen? Was Leibniz right? This is the best world of all possible world God could create? Or is the suffering too great to allow that, would God have been better not creating at all, in fact? Or is God rather part of the process of creation?

In the eighteenth century the prevailing view of God was deist : God is the supreme being of the universe who may or may not arbitrarily intervene from time to time, a view which Voltaire demolished. Jesus shows us however a different God, one who is part of the process of creation. Death and resurrection are how the universe works after all, deeply written into its fabric and processes

Do I understand all this? Not particularly, but there is a whole tradition of faith which says faith is more about asking a question than receiving an answer. In Zen buddhism for example there are many riddles called koans, which reveal the paradoxical nature of reality, such as:

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The purpose of these is to get us to understand reality differently. Then think about some of Jesus's sayings, 'if you wish to live you must first die', is one such koan, or "you must be born again". Nicodemus tries to understand this logically, but Jesus is asking him to look deeper and understand in a different way. The gospel of Thomas, one of those gospels which did not make it into the New Testament, consists mostly of these koans.

This whole tradition has been nurtured in Christianity in particular in the monasteries but has sadly not often been passed on in the parishes for fear of upsetting people. This has been counterproductive. So when we look at the earthquake in Haiti, I want to suggest we respond in two ways: rather than give up on faith we see it as an opportunity to understand God differently and to perceive the reality of God more deeply and differently than we are perhaps used to. In the end maybe we are asking the wrong question. Giles Fraser put it rather well, like this:

"On a very basic level, what people find in religion is not so much the answers, but a means of responding to and living with life's hardest questions"

And the other response we are invited is not intellectual analysis but a response of compassion. Remember compassion means sharing someone else's pain - what Christ shows us in relation to what God does with us in the end. This it seems to me is the greatest test of our faith: Our response will be then the challenge of love: how do we respond to disasters? Handwringing or helping; with bitterness or faith, with cynicism or trust? By this practice which the world's religions have put before us and which Christ lived out, we do find our answer, even if it is not the one we expected.

But it is an answer we have to discover or ourselves.