

Preaching on a Difficult Subject

In the year 2004 The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, which Archbishop Thomas Cranmer reminded us, ‘Is commonly called Christmass Day’, fell on a Saturday. I knew that I was scheduled to conduct lay-led, Reserved Sacrament, Eucharistic services on that day, on the Sunday, (Christmass 1, St Stephen, Boxing Day) as well as on the following Sunday (Christmass 1I). Knowing how busy I expected to be with assorted seasonal, family matters I made sure that I had three sermons prepared well in advance. On the day of the Feast our church was, as is sometimes the case, full of visiting families with children, so I abandoned my address and replaced it with an impromptu, seasonal quiz for the youngsters. We concluded by forming a children’s choir and sang *Away in a Manger*, a carol that they all knew from memory. I was impressed, all went well. On the following day, with a significantly reduced number of worshippers, I talked about how the Great Forty Days of Christmass (to Candlemass, 2nd Feb) differed so much from those of Easter, with a Martyrdom, a Saint’s Day, the Commemoration of the Holy Innocents, Jesus’ Circumcision and Baptism, etc. My sermon for Christmass II was already prepared.

Why do I tell you this? In the Spring 2023 edition of *Transforming Ministry* the editor suggested that she would welcome thoughts about preaching on difficult texts. With her approval I have interpreted this invitation to include preaching about difficult subjects. This takes me back to Christmass, 2004. We returned from Church on Boxing Day to find our news channels inundated with reports of the Indonesian tsunami, a cataclysmically violent event that claimed many thousands of lives all around the Indian Ocean.¹ What to preach about next Sunday, that was the question. Should I ignore this literally, earth shattering event, and carry on as if nothing had happened, or face it, head on? I chose the latter course. For what it is worth, here is my rewritten sermon.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be always accepted in thy sight, O Lord, ✠ our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On Boxing Day an earthquake which measured 9.1–9.3 on the Richter Scale occurred a few miles from the Indonesian coast. Twenty-five miles below the seabed the Indo-Australian tectonic plate slid further below the Philippine or Burma plate into what geologists call a subduction zone. At one minute before eight o’clock in the morning local time the Philippine plate recoiled and forced an enormous volume of water to the ocean surface. One hundred feet high waves spread out in all directions and the resulting tsunamis impinged on and inundated many thousands of miles of coastline all around the Indian Ocean. It was an event that has been described as devastatingly disastrous and was equal to the sum of all the world’s earthquakes for half a century. This cataclysm had the power of the explosion of 190 million tons of TNT, that’s 9,500 Hiroshima sized nuclear bombs, and it was powerful enough to make the whole planet wobble on its axis. Its waves travelled 3,000 miles across the Indian Ocean and killed people and destroyed property in Africa. In the comfort of our Christmass tide sitting rooms and fire sides we witnessed the aftermath of the violence and carnage; a death toll estimated at many tens of thousands and still rising. And we ask, how can a loving God allow this to happen? If he is the loving Father that Jesus Christ came to tell us about, then how can he possibly let this sort of tragedy occur? Is he omnipotent, or not? Could he have stopped a catastrophe of this magnitude, which caused the deaths of so many? Very simple questions; but what are the answers? We pray for the survivors and intercede with God for the souls of the dead and the dying. In such defining moments our prayers become intense and urgent. Yet we are reduced to silent horror, and are sick at heart, filled with compassion, outrage, fear, despair, and a sense of helplessness, all in equal measure.

In the book called Genesis we can read of what appears to be a similar, parallel event to this. The writers included the story of Noah and the Great Flood. For those ancient

¹ We later learned that the final death toll was estimated to be 227,898 in 14 countries.

peoples, there was no such thing as a purely natural disaster. Everything had a moral cause. If the world was turned inside out by earthquake or flood, they knew they were being punished and they asked, 'Who sinned?' If the biblical authors had seen news reports of Sunday's floods they would have concluded that someone, or some group, in the affected area had done something terribly wrong. Today's religious thinking person does not accept that logic but there is a conviction in the Flood narrative of God taking all those much-loved human beings, made, we are told, in his own likeness and divine image, to near extinction. At other times God's chosen people the Jews were exiled, driven into captivity and suffered privations, first in Egypt and later in Babylon – for them these were not geological disasters, but were certainly personal calamities.

Can we be clear that natural disasters, or indeed calamities of any kind, are not God's punishment for man's sin? Saint Luke gives us Jesus' view on this subject. Some Jews had apparently been martyred for their faith by Pontius Pilate. There was a view prevailing that they had been more sinful than their contemporaries who had not been similarly put to death. Jesus was quite clear about this. He said, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, No: but, except you repent, you shall all likewise perish.' He amplified this by referring to a local incident that seems to have happened at that time. A tower, probably built of brick or stone, had collapsed at Siloam and eighteen had died. Jesus said, 'those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, do you think that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No: but, except you repent, you shall all likewise perish.' Jesus is at once saying that the disaster is not caused by our sin, but he stresses that if we do not repent and stop sinning then we stand the chance of perishing in some similar way. What does this paradox mean? If we sin as individuals then God does not wreak punishment on us by making us suffer in some sort of misfortune. However, if we go on sinning and disobeying God then calamities will continue and we may well get caught up in one or more of them. Can God then do anything to control the elements and stop tragedies such as we witnessed last weekend? Again, it is clear from Holy Scripture that he can. All three synoptic gospels tell us of the journey that Jesus made with his disciples across the Sea of Galilee, when a storm blew up. All tell us that Jesus, 'rebuked the wind and the sea,' and calm was restored. So astonished were his friends that they asked among themselves, 'who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?' So, it seems quite clear that God, certainly in the person of his Son, can control the elements, and thus eliminate or eradicate what we call natural disasters. Why then does he not do so?

Professor Paul Davies, an Australian theologian and a recipient of the prestigious Templeton Prize for Advances in the Study of Science and Religion, suggests that if the Christian faith is to be credible to modern people, then they have got to get over the notion of an 'interventionist God,' that is a God who hears, cares, and acts for our good. In contradistinction I believe we serve a God who rules! And I think he is a God who enjoys demonstrating to us that he is in charge. Sometimes he shows us one way and sometimes another. I strongly disagree with Professor Davies. I do believe in an interventionist God who does hear, care, and act for our good. Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes he lets the storm rage and calms the child in the storm. When we call upon him he does hear, he does care, and he will bring about something for our good. I believe that sometimes God is working on the greater miracle – he calms us during a storm – because that has a greater, long term impact. But that doesn't mean he always acts just how we want him to and where and when we want him to. He is still in charge, not us. Why then does he allow awful events like tsunamis to ravage vast coastlines and drown countless thousands?

Whether we believe in an interventionist God or not is immaterial. If we believe that God does **not** intervene then we have to accept that anything goes. Once the Big Bang happened, some 13 billion years ago, then the experiment was set to run, and all must suffer the consequences, good or bad. If we believe that God **does** intervene in the affairs of his universe then we equally have to believe that he alone decides what interventions to make, and when. That is God's business, not ours. God does not determine the minutiae of our

existence. To do so would mean that would have no free-will, no independence of action, and that is as important to God as it is to us. Would we want to live in a world where there was no risk, no excitement, no danger, no thrills, no uncertainty? Is there really any difference, except in scale, between a child running into the road and getting killed by a car and the crew of a fishing boat lost in a sudden storm? Or between a few hundred who may die in the great mid-western plains of the United States because of a tornado or many tens of thousands who perish in an earthquake, volcano or tsunami? We all understand that our world is the way it is, it's just the magnitude of events that sometimes frighten us. The heartache and anguish felt by the parents of the child in the road accident are no less, and are no less real, than that experienced by relatives of the fishermen, or the tornado sufferers or, indeed, those who lost loved ones in recent days. If we think that God could and should have stepped in to reduce the enormous death toll last Sunday how do we know that he hasn't redirected the path of a meteorite from its collision path with the earth, an event that could have destroyed all life on the planet?

God is in charge. Let there be no doubts about that. By simple analogy, we are not! More importantly we need to know, and we need to live out our lives in the knowledge, that we are searched for, understood, forgiven, reconciled, redeemed and held in the arms of a loving God. We may turn away from him and think that we know best, that we can go our own separate ways. But that call to return to the God who loves us may be triggered by some terrible, earth-shattering atrocity, or some bitter sorrow, or a life changing event. And we are not charged to love what Friedrich Nietzsche called, 'the God of the gaps,' the God who answers our needs only when all other human avenues have failed. We proclaim the one who is a constant companion and who offers us steadfast love even in the misery and the sadness and the grief found in our world and in our lives. That is the only bit of the Christian gospel we need to grasp firmly and live by.

Now to God, Father ✠ Son and Holy Ghost, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all honour, might, majesty, dominion, and power, now, henceforth, and for ever more. Amen.