

Christ and Disasters

Luke 13:1-5; Romans 8:18-23

Having watched the events in Japan unfold over last weekend I decided that I wanted to address this subject of natural disasters as a church. Tragically, it's only about 14 months since we last spoke about this following the Haiti earthquake, and what I'm going to say is essentially the same as what I said then.

But I want us to look at this again for three reasons. Firstly, I think it would be impossible for anyone who is a Christian, to watch the images of the Tsunami and hear the reports coming out of Japan and not be deeply affected by them; and in the face of terrible suffering, that was no one's fault, to ask the question 'God, why? Why do you allow these things to happen? Whole towns washed away, thousands dead and tens of thousands missing?' And the problem is that if you don't get a heart-satisfying answer to that, it can eat away at your faith. The second reason is that whether now or following some future event, your friends, colleagues or family members may ask those same questions of you. You want them to know that Jesus Christ loves them and wants them to turn to Him, and in response they will respond with 'yeh, but what about Japan, what about Haiti, what about the Asian Tsunami?' How can a good God allow innocent suffering? I think all of us need to have an answer to that question that goes beyond simple trite platitudes.

Which also feeds into my third reason for wanting to look at this. Most of us are just distant spectators on Japan's current trauma. But it is highly likely that one day several, even many of us in this room will face our own, personal tsunami. The unexpected, out of the blue, death of a loved one, or the personal diagnosis of cancer, some serious life trauma that leaves us asking 'God why?' And so I want to do my best to answer that this morning, so that for your own heart now, for the sake of your friends and for your good in the future you can think about this biblically.

And let's acknowledge from the start that this philosophical question has been around for many years: if God is good and all-powerful, why didn't He stop the earthquake and tsunami from happening? If He was all-powerful, He could have stopped it, unless of course He *isn't* good. And if He *is* good, He *would* have stopped it, unless of course He *isn't* all-powerful. And the fact that He *didn't* stop the earthquake means that He cannot be both good and all-powerful, which means that either God doesn't exist, or if He does He is not the God of the Bible.

That's how the argument goes. Well, in the face of this terrible devastation and suffering, how do you answer that?

That was a question posed to two UK church ministers following the Haiti earthquake in an article on the BBC website called 'why does God allow disasters?' And their response was, essentially, 'we have no answer except prayer, we are silent in the face of the immensity of this tragedy.' Now there are times when silence is appropriate, when it is time to weep with those who weep rather than talk. But does the Bible have nothing to say in the face of this devastation? Is the word of God mute in the face of disaster? And the answer is 'no'. God is not silent in the face of human tragedy.

And that God is both good and all-powerful is the unrelenting message of hope of this book. And so, as before, I've titled this 'Christ and Disasters' because this

isn't about trite answers to swallow and then regurgitate, we need to root this in the gospel, the good news that God is redeeming and saving a people for Himself through Jesus and that even these devastating disasters have a purpose in that.

And we're going to deal with this in 4 parts. First, I want you to understand that God is sovereign, even in disasters. Secondly, I want you to see what the Bible says about the state of planet earth. Thirdly, I want you to grasp that far from God being silent, with his hand on his mouth in such events, these are His megaphone to try and get our attention. And finally, I want you to see that these disasters are not the last word, but hope is.

God is Sovereign/on the throne

Atheism would have you believe that you are at the mercy of random events. You are a product of chance, and your life is at the mercy of chance. The Bible has much better news for you. The God who created the heavens and the earth and whom we worship is in absolute control.

He didn't just create the universe and then back off, and leave it to run along by itself. If He did, you might be able to excuse Him of these events. But the Bible tells us that not only did He create the universe by His word, speaking it all into being, He continues to uphold it by the word of His power (Heb 1:3). And He is intimately involved in it, overseeing everything that goes on.

Isaiah 40 says *"Behold the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold He takes up the coastlands like fine dust.... It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and it's inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when He blows on them and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare Me?... says the Holy One."* Isaiah 40:15, 22-25.

And in Matthew 10:29 Jesus says, 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.'

But if God is so intimately involved with creation, does that mean He is in control of hurricanes and storms and earthquakes and tsunamis, and the devastation they bring? Well, the answer from the Bible is 'yes': everything is in His control.

Listen to what Job's one good friend has to say on this. Job is facing serious suffering. A personal earthquake, a personal tsunami has struck his life and he demands answers from God. This is what Elihu his friend responds, and while every other of Job's friends are rebuked by God for what they said, Elihu wasn't. What he says is true: Job 37:9-13: *"From its chamber comes the whirlwind, and cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for His land or for love, He causes it to happen."*

In other words Elihu says to Job ‘You cannot remove God from this, you cannot console yourself that He had nothing to do with it. In fact it’s the opposite. V13 “whether for correction or for His land or for love, He causes it to happen.” Whatever His purpose is, there is His purpose behind it.

Well, perhaps understandably, when his life lies in ruins, Job is less than satisfied. And if you know the story, you know that God finally comes and speaks to Job directly. Job 38:1 – *‘Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind’*. He speaks to Job from the storm, from out of a brewing natural disaster and He doesn’t comfort Job with sweet words, He overwhelms Job with His majesty. Time and again He throws questions at Job to bring Job to realize that God is God and Job is not. 38:2-7: *“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone?”*

Job has his long list of questions coming up from His pain and God’s response is: Job, I am the Sovereign Creator, not you, all the power is mine, would you question me? And Job never does get his questions answered, but what he does get is a revelation of the sheer majesty and splendour and authority of God and in the face of encountering God as He really is Job falls to His knees in worship and His questions fall away.

One of our greatest problems as Christians, is that we have lost sight of the sheer grandeur and power and authority of God, and we have reduced Him to our little helper, our benevolent Father Christmas, whose only aim should be to make us happy and healthy, when the devastating power of earthquakes and tsunamis are but a drop in the ocean of His power. Dorothy Sayers the American novelist said: "We have declawed the Lion of Judah & made him a housecat for pale priests & pious old ladies."

To understand disasters like Japan biblically, we have to understand that God is in total control, even in the storm. We cannot get away from that, neither should we want to.

The state of Creation

When you watch, open-mouthed, those images of the tsunami destroying whole towns, it is almost impossible not to think ‘this isn’t right, things shouldn’t be like this.’ That is I think, one of the most powerful, non-scriptural arguments against atheism. Because you know, deep-down inside, that things shouldn’t be like this. But why do you think that? Because if atheistic evolution is right, there is no reason at all why things shouldn’t be like this: those houses crumbling like match wood is just death by random chance. Yet there is this voice inside you telling you something is wrong with the world.

And you’re right. Something is desperately wrong with the world. When God created the world He could say repeatedly in Genesis 1 ‘it’s good, it’s good, it’s

good and finally, 'it's very good.' But is Japan, or Haiti, or Katrina, or the Asian Tsunami very good? No. So what's happened? What has converted that, to this?

Well Paul spells it out in Romans 8:20 'For the creation was subjected to futility'. The futility, the seeming meaninglessness, of disasters, of cancer, of death. As a result Paul says in v21 that creation is in bondage to decay, and in v22 that it is groaning together in the pains of childbirth.

And what Paul has in mind here is what theologians call 'the fall' - that catastrophic event when our first parents, the representatives of all mankind, rebelled against God. And in response, the whole created order was subjected to futility. But by whom? Was it Adam, our first father who subjected it to futility? No. He had no power to do it. Was it satan, who tempted Adam and Eve to disobey and rebel? And if it was, can we lay the blame for natural disasters as some do at the door of the enemy? No. And the reason it wasn't him is because Paul says 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope.' Creation was subjected to futility *in hope* of something else. In hope of something better. And satan never subjected anyone to anything out of hope.

The Bible tells us that it was God who subjected the world to futility and He did so in response to mankind's sin and rebellion against Him: 'Cursed is the ground because of you.' (Gen 3:17)

Now if you haven't already, I'm sure you'll hear some one somewhere suggest that this earthquake was a result of Japan's sin, just as they did for Haiti, New Orleans or the Asian Tsunami. And it's clear from the Bible that God brings calamity against individuals and cities and nations in response to their sin. It's knowing that that prompted someone years ago to say that if God does not judge America soon, and you could put Britain in there as well, He will have to raise up Sodom and Gomorrah and apologise. And yet, when people came to Jesus in Luke 13 asking Him about those who had been murdered by Pilate, Jesus brings up another disaster - the collapse of this tower at Siloam, the equivalent of an earthquake, and the people killed there, and He is very clear that they didn't lose their lives because they were any worse than anyone else, and so you cannot run into something like this latest disaster saying 'its because of their sin'.

But what you can say, unambiguously, is that all these events are as a result of all our sin. Creation groans under the weight of corporate-humanity-in-Adam's sin and rebellion against God. In response to which God subjects it to futility. And so whilst the psalms tell us that the heavens declare the glory of God, and living here in Switzerland, the mountains do too, the fallenness, the futility of creation, witnessed in earthquakes and tsunamis tells us something else as well: of mankind separated and alienated and in rebellion from God.

Now you may hear that and think, isn't that over the top? I mean can you really compare one act of disobedience by our first parents with the terrible, cumulative tragedy of natural disaster after natural disaster that God subjecting creation to futility has unleashed? Surely the punishment should fit the crime. Isn't this the equivalent of God having some fit of temper?

Well, if that is our response I think it is an indication of how little we understand the holiness of God and the awfulness of sin.

So, how should we respond?

God's megaphone

In his book *The Problem of Pain* CS Lewis said 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'

Far from God being silent in the face of tragedy, God is crying out to us in these disasters. When faced with the slaughter of Jewish worshipers by Pilate and the loss of life in a building collapse, Jesus' response was to remind people of their frailty and call them to repentance 'do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else. No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'

In other words, Christ's message to you and to me, to the world, through the megaphone of these disasters is 'this could have been you, so repent and turn to God while you can'. It may not be an earthquake, it probably won't be. But it could be a car crash, or a terrorist atrocity or a heart attack, or a stroke, or just dying in your sleep of old age. We will all die, and you don't know when, so repent and turn to God, He's rousing you from your slumber, and accept His free gift of life while you have life.

And the message of the gospel is that in the face of humanity's rebellion against God, He will use even disasters to call us back to Himself, and Christ comes to suffer in our place, at the cross he takes upon himself the punishment for our sin, the disaster of our sin, and absorbs it in his own death: the ultimate innocent suffering, the ultimate innocent death, that you and I might live. So if you're not yet a Christian don't turn a deaf ear to His megaphone, but repent and turn to Jesus who has suffered for you.

And for those of us who are Christians, repent of any self-righteousness, any luke-warmness: this could have been you, Jesus says.

Secondly, disasters like this should prompt us to pray, and to pray specifically for the people of Japan where only 0.5% of people are Christians. They should prompt us to give and some of us in the future, will go. The very nature of the gospel is that Christ who was rich became poor for us that we might become rich, and that generosity, that compassionate giving of God for us should prompt us to sacrificial giving as well. James, Jesus' brother says this: 'if a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them 'go in peace, be warmed and filled' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?' (James 2:15-16). So in response, give – not out of guilt but out of the gospel, and to organizations you can trust.

But whilst God is sovereign and has subjected creation to futility in response to sin, and He uses disasters to get our attention, these disasters and the futility they spring from do not have the last word.

Not the last word

The gospel is not pessimistic. The gospel has as its end, not disaster, but glorious future. And Paul spells that out in Romans 8:

v18: For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us'. Now, if the sufferings of this present time – earthquakes, tsunamis, nuclear meltdowns, cancer, terrorist atrocities are not worth comparing to what is to come, how great must that which is to come be! V20: For the creation was subjected to futility... in hope – not in despair- but in hope. v21: the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay.

And then comes the killer blow: v22 For we know that the whole of creation has been groaning together in the pains of child birth until now.

So what we're witnessing are birth pangs. And there is a huge difference between birth pangs and death pangs. When I was a medic my on call room was two floors below labour ward, and I would be kept awake at night by mothers screaming in labour. There were times when I was sorely tempted to walk up there and tell them 'would you please put a sock in it, Mrs. Slack never made so much as a squeek, would you kindly do likewise!' But how different our response would be to those screams if they were coming from a terminal care ward. The cries from a mother in labour, the pain is real, it's searing, it's terrible, but it's pain, it's groans with hope at its end.

And the groaning, screaming, labour pains of creation are not the last word. Hope is the last word. A new heavens and a new earth and a people redeemed by Jesus Christ and for His glory, are the last word.

So in the face of this latest disaster, can we say that God is both all-powerful and all-good? Yes, He is all powerful – all power and all authority is His. And yes He is good. It is our conception of what it means to be good that is wrong. God is more good than you and I can know. We think of good as happy life in this life. God has something far more glorious in mind, and the sufferings and trials and disasters of this life are but the labour pains of the glorious future to come: when everything is reconciled to Him in Jesus Christ.