

Rev Dr Max Champion at St John's UCA Mt Waverley

### Introduction:

We gather to worship God this day, at the end of a week that has shaken our State. As we worship we think of the dead, the grieving, the homeless, and those who are stunned by the terrible events of last weekend. We also bring to mind the sacrifice of people who have fought the fires, provided relief and been so generous in response.

Today the readings and the sermon will focus on some of the theological and human questions which arise from such an event.

I was unsure during the week about what I should preach on, having addressed in this place the issues after September 11, the Bali Bombing and also the Asian Tsunami. However, spirited discussion at the Worship Committee Meeting on Wednesday night convinced me that this issue must be addressed again, with all its difficulties and challenges. So I thought perhaps then I should tackle this and attempt to say something in such a difficult situation. The subject is fraught with difficulties – theological and pastoral – not least because words are so inadequate and no explanation is adequate.

I commend to you two pieces for your consideration during the week.

The poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: an extraordinary piece, called 'The Powers of Good' written four months before he was hanged in a Gestapo prison (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p400). That was the result of human evil! The other is an article by journalist, Barney Zwartz, in *The Age*, 12 Feb 09, where he addresses these issues briefly and in a very profound way.

At times like this prayer itself is difficult – but necessary. Let us then come before God with prayers of Adoration and Confession ...

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Lessons – Psalm 42:1-11; Romans 8:18-25; Luke 13:1-5

*'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await for adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies.'* (Romans 8:22,23)

Unspeakable horror! Unbearable suffering and loss! Unimaginable grief! Words fail. Senses are numbed. Life is futile and God seems absent.

We want 'explanations'. Are these horrific events the result of blind fate or the will of God? Is it a sign of divine judgment? Do we have to choose between God who is compassionate but powerless and God who is Almighty but uncaring? Shouldn't we do the honest thing and abandon belief in God altogether?

A number of questions need to be separated as we think about these disturbing events.

First, is there a direct link between the victims of tragedy and sin? Pastor Danny Nalliah of 'Catch the Fire' Ministries thinks so: attributing the fires to God's punishment for State Parliament decriminalising abortion. There is also an Islamic website that says that they are Allah's punishment for Australia going to war in Iraq.

In Luke 13 Jesus utterly rejects this kind of logic (Luke 13:1f). It is bad theology – and bad taste! UC President Gregor Henderson is right to say that Nalliah's claim is 'ludicrous, abhorrent and misunderstands the nature of God' (*The Age*, 12/02/09). No. The brutal massacre of Jewish worshippers (a result of human evil) and the collapse of a building (a natural catastrophe) do not tell us anything about the sin (or the faith) of the victims. They are not any worse (or any better) than those who survived! We cannot draw conclusions between horrific deaths and the character of those who perished.

Nor is there any guarantee that the faithful will be spared suffering. As God 'makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust' (Matthew 5:45), so suffering caused by natural disasters is no respecter of persons. Remember the story of Job: a man of impeccable faith suffers terrible affliction. He rejects the bad theology of his friends who try to 'explain' his plight by what he has done or not done. At the end he simply reaffirms his faith in God as sovereign Lord. No explanation; only a calling to faithfulness amid his suffering.

Now it is not our place to decide whether natural calamity is a sign that God has run out of patience with some of his rebellious children – even those who trample human dignity and destroy life! 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; therefore turn back from your evil ways, O house of Israel,' says the Lord (Ezekiel 33:11). Jesus sees catastrophes as stark reminders that all of us are called to live in the period of

grace between our birth and death – whenever that may be or however it may happen. Elsewhere he calls disciples 'to love their enemies, to pray for those who persecute them' (Matthew 5:45f). His ministry is marked by grace to sinners, judgment on the self-righteous, healing of many forms of natural (or unnatural?) affliction and calming the terrors of nature. He binds the wounds of the broken-hearted and provides rest for troubled souls. He launches an assault on all that is evil – all that is not God's will.

He does speak of a Last Judgment when faith and goodness will be rewarded and unbelief and evil punished. 'When did we find you hungry and thirsty ...?' (Matthew 25:36f) There are passages which speak of God's holy anger (wrath) against persistent idolatry and inhumanity. In Exodus the drowning of cruel Egyptian oppressors is ascribed to the intervention of God, as is the flood which faithful Noah survives. The new thing in Christ is that final judgment of all – faithful and faithless alike – belongs to God at the consummation of history and that it will be made by the One who loved sinful humanity so deeply that he entered into our broken world and took evil upon himself so that we might be reconciled to God. That changes the whole notion of judgment, condemnation and punishment. No. There is no link between horrific suffering and faith or unbelief.

Second, if there is no simple cause and effect relation between natural catastrophes and sin, then how should we react? The fragility, brutality, vulnerability and brevity of life which are starkly highlighted in natural disasters should impress on us the urgency of responding to the grace of God. Time is short. People must decide where they stand in relation to Christ's love for them. Nobody has unlimited time in which to accept the invitation. If we are pre-occupied with explanations then we won't see that time given to us is a time-of-grace in which God is to be worshipped and Christ obeyed in serving our neighbours.

If we are constantly asking, 'Why?' then we won't be open to God's presence in making us aware of the beauty and terror of nature. Bishop JV Taylor says that it is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to Christ and 'the brother or sister in Christ, the fellow-man, the point of need or the heart-breaking brutality and the equally heart-breaking beauty of the world'. He 'opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality. If one is closed up against being hurt, or blind towards one's fellow-men, one is inevitably shut off from God also. ... Seeing and vulnerability go together. (*The Go-Between God*, p19) The sacrifice, kindness, generosity and support of so many people since the catastrophic infernos are signs – whether people recognise it or not – of Christ-like compassion for which we should be thankful!

In his book *The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World* (1980) Diogenes Allen says that 'suffering at the hands of nature may be an opportunity for contact with God' (p47). It may be 'redemptive', forcing us to realise that we are not the all-controlling centre of the universe but are called to bear one another's often terrible burdens.

Third, in all of this, how do we understand the relation between 'God' and 'Nature'? Insurance policies cover damages caused by 'Acts of God'. We refer to 'Mother Nature' to explain the beauty and terror of nature. The popular view is that 'Nature' and 'God' are equivalent explanations for what happens in the world. It often doesn't seem to matter to us which term we use. In Christianity, however, God is Sovereign Lord of all things – including nature. God is not a nature God (who is found in earth, water, wind and fire) but the Creator and Redeemer of all things.

If this is so, then, contrary to our first impression that in such events God is absent or powerless, we may glimpse the presence of God through the fire and smoke of this apocalyptic event. And here we must tread extremely carefully lest we downplay the ferocity of the fires and the unimaginable suffering, anguish or grief experienced by the dead, the badly injured and survivors, and give cheap comfort but no hope.

Nature, like human beings, has been created by God with relative autonomy from God. That is, God doesn't direct its activity as we might program a robot. Nature sustains life. Without earth, wind, water and fire and the general laws of nature, we could not exist! Without bodies we couldn't marry and raise families. We couldn't make things, work, enjoy leisure, behold beauty or be involved in community life. But as we have seen, nature by its very structure also threatens life! Fire generates energy and warmth for our bodies and communities, but it also incinerates our bodies, homes and towns.

It does matter whether we refer to 'God' or 'Mother Nature'. We must understand this double aspect of 'nature' in relation to the purposes of God as embodied in Jesus. This is the key. We are to delight in the beauty of nature. We are also to support those who mourn and to be glad that Christ has endured affliction and triumphed over it 'for us'. We are to seek God's presence in the midst of suffering.

This would be cheap comfort – cheap comfort indeed – for the victims of last weekend's inferno if it were not for the fact that, in his beloved Son, God the Father has already experienced the horror of nature. The body of Christ was subject to natural forces. He had nowhere to lay his head. He wept at the death of his friend. He lamented the unbelief of religious leaders. He was despised and rejected. On the Cross Jesus

experienced the most severe 'affliction': extreme physical pain, mental anguish, social rejection, contempt, degradation. He experienced the most severe separation from his Father without breaking contact with him. At the moment of greatest separation – 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:29)' – their unity in love is maintained by his readiness to take on himself our 'affliction' (D Allen, 54f). This is confirmed in the Resurrection where the body of Jesus, 'by nature' dead, buried and decayed, is raised to life as a sign of hope for us and the whole creation.

If it were not for the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, then last weekend's horrific events would force us to stop believing in God! That would be the honest thing to do. That is why the historical event of Jesus Christ must be the centrepiece of the Church's preaching, worship and service. Far from being a disposable relic of primitive faith, as Bishop Spong and others are constantly telling us it is, this event is the only basis on which human beings may live in hope in the midst of historical conflicts and catastrophic natural disasters.

Put it this way:

- The Gospel of the Incarnation (God's becoming flesh with us) assures us that God, out of love for sinful, fragile human beings, has entered into the real world. God is not detached from his fallible children or broken creation.
- The Gospel of the Cross assures us that God has suffered affliction; that, as *The Apostles' Creed* puts it, 'He has descended into hell.' Surely 'hell' is what happened last weekend! God not only identifies with us when we go through 'hell' but, in love for us, bears our hell.
- The Gospel of the Resurrection assures us that, despite the worst that befalls us, affliction and death are not the end. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is a sign of hope for all charred bodies.

The incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus must be at the centre of our thinking and acting in what we do in the Church as a sign of hope for the world. Apart from the particular historical event of Jesus Christ – the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord – we would have no grounds for hope amid these calamitous firestorms. 'Mother Nature' in all her fury would have triumphed. God would be absent. There would be no ultimate future for charred bodies, grieving relatives or shattered communities, notwithstanding the welcome signs of heroism and community spirit being displayed.

There is no guarantee that we shall feel God's gracious presence in the midst of suffering. God will seem silent, absent, dead or malevolent to us and particularly to people directly affected by these dreadful events. What has been said doesn't minimise the terror of what has happened. It doesn't give easy and comfortable answers to urgent questions about human suffering and the will of God. But it does give us grounds to begin to see that not even 'catastrophes' of nature, like the terrifying infernos, will ultimately thwart God's purpose for all bodies and for everybody.

If this approach doesn't commend itself, consider the problems for those who do not believe it:

- Some believe that evil is an illusion. Tell that to the fire victims!
- Some believe that good and evil come from the same source. No. God hates evil.
- Some believe that God is a detached Creator who got the whole thing going but doesn't give a damn now; others think that we are completely subject to natural processes, that there is no God and that the universe is ruled by an impersonal Fate. How comforting!
- Some believe that human beings ultimately control nature. Wishful thinking.

Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection still does not explain why such terrible suffering takes place. But it does assure us that our afflictions are taken up into Christ's suffering. Therefore we may live by hope even in the midst of the most dreadful circumstances and also have our eyes opened to the pressing needs of those who are suffering terrible affliction now.

The extraordinary generosity and self-sacrifice of so many people in the catastrophic firestorms is a sign (in a society which often mocks Christianity) that something of Christ's self-giving love is present amidst unimaginable horror and suffering. It remains to be seen whether they will continue to be sustained by Christ-centred hope in 'the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23). May it be our prayer that they and we shall be sustained by the hope that has come in Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth.

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