



The Tsunami: if God's so good... why?

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2004 was a grim year; innocent tribes-people ruthlessly attacked in western Sudan; hundreds of children brutally murdered in Beslan; Iraq invaded and terrorist cells responding with death and mayhem. These were hard to bear, but not hard to explain, Christians know that evil people can get out of control; we are used to man's continuing inhumanity to his own. But the disaster that broke on the western Pacific Rim on Boxing Day defies imagination. Daily, as the estimated number of dead reached mind-numbing heights, thinking people who believe in God found themselves with some tough questions to answer ... how could He let this happen?

Most days I walk round the field behind my house, it gives me about twenty minutes of peace for prayer and reflection. The tsunami shattered my peace; how do you talk about this with your God? 'Lord, have you any idea what you have done, what you have allowed? What were you thinking of? What was going through your mind in the couple of hours it took that wave to reach the beaches? I wouldn't have done that... I couldn't have allowed that to happen... how could you?'

The problem

Like all Christians I believe that God is good, and that he gets involved with the affairs of humanity. This is the message that lies at the heart of the gospel; God saw the mess we are in and dived into human history to rescue us. He sees our needs and answers our prayers; he cares about us. I believe, therefore I have a problem – God knew what was coming and he didn't appear to do anything about it. The editor of the website, Arts

and Letters Daily[1] put it like this, 'Of God is God, he's not good. If God is good, he's not God. You can't have it both ways, especially after the Indian Ocean catastrophe.' I found my self entertaining the possibility that I don't really understand God at all.' Perhaps he is not really omnipotent' I wondered, he saw the wave coming and wanted to save people, but he couldn't, he just didn't have the power. Or maybe he does not really love us at all? He is a monster who couldn't wait to see the havoc when the wave landed.

These are the things going on in my mind as I plodded 'round the field behind my house. Yet at the same time my mind kept going back to a conversation Jesus once had with some friends:

Two tragedies

Sometime during his ministry in Galilee Jesus was told about two tragic events in Jerusalem; some Jewish worshippers had been murdered by Roman soldiers, and a tower had collapsed on another group of people leaving eighteen of them dead [Luke 13:1-5]. A simple and powerful explanation was doing the rounds; 'Those people must have done something dreadful to deserve that, God has judged them!' Religious types have a knack for this kind of explanation, but Jesus reckoned it was baloney and said so; 'Were they really worse sinners than anyone else?' he asked.

On internet discussion forums and websites round the world, there are those who insist this is the simplest explanation for the Asian tsunami, an awesome punishment from above. But can anyone really believe that God would sanction such a random act of judgement, without rhyme or reason? Were the people who suffered any worse than us? No way, this is not an explanation, it is an obscenity.

Luke tells us that Jesus' challenged those who put the blame on the victims to turn the searchlight on themselves; 'Unless you repent, you will also perish' he said. A disaster should stop us in our tracks; it reminds us that we are living in an abnormal world, inhabited by abnormal people. We are outraged because, deep down, we know that things like this are not meant to happen, yet they do happen and ultimately we are all responsible; every single one of us.

Complex world, unstable component

Imagine an immensely complex aircraft engine providing the power for your flight across the Atlantic. Miles of wiring connects it to the cockpit from where the pilot controls every function of the machine. Now imagine that it is fitted with a unique component, a sophisticated control box that makes its own decisions. The Pilot's instructions are fed into it, but the box makes its own mind up, it can ignore what the pilot tells it to do.

Half-way across the ocean the control box shuts off the pilot's instructions altogether, it decides that, from now on, its own decisions will take precedence over those of the pilot. This is a dangerous moment, for while the control box is making the rules up as it goes along, the whole aircraft is in peril. The component with free will, the bit that can ignore the pilot, puts both man and machine in mortal danger.

This seems to be the picture of the world that the Bible gives us. The crown of God's creation, the human race, has gone haywire and our sin has brought the whole of creation, down around our ears. So God tells Adam, 'Cursed is the ground because of you...'[2] and Paul describes 'The whole creation groaning as in the pains of childbirth'[3]. The cursed ground groaned on December 26th and it screams at us; 'This is not meant to happen, you live in an abnormal world'.

Binding up broken hearts

People [like me] who conjure with such theoretical explanations for these events had better take notice of something Jesus never did. Of all the people he met who were suffering terrible pain he never offered a theoretical explanation to any of them. He never once gave any of them a lecture on philosophy or the theory of suffering. Instead he told them to trust God, whatever the circumstances, to hang on to the one who could help them.

It is fashionable to dismiss this kind of trust as taking the easy way out; in fact it is the opposite. Even the committed professionals are rattled by suffering on the scale of the Pacific tsunami; the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less, confessed that his faith was 'upset' by the catastrophe[4].

Continuing to believe is not easy, it requires some effort; the opposite response, abandoning your faith, is the easy way out. The former curator of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, Yehuda Bauer put it pungently, 'There's no way there can be an all powerful and a just God, because if he is all powerful, he's Satan, considering the recurrent prevalence of genocidal evil in the world. If he is just, he's a nebbish[5]... I don't need a God like that.'[6]

The way people often express their unbelief sounds potent and brave and honest; in fact it is lazy and easy and it leaves us with... nothing. At the precise moment in our lives when we really need something, or someone, big enough to take the weight of our pain, we have got nothing. To people like that Jesus gave, not slick answers but practical advice; 'Trust me... you don't know what is going on, I do, just trust me!'

And following Jesus means that we must find ways of expressing his love, just as he left people fed, clothed and in their right minds, we are to take our cue from him. If you believe then you will, however reluctantly and even resentfully, have to accept that there are questions about suffering that we cannot answer. For the child of faith the question changes from 'Why did this happen' to 'What can I do to help those who suffer'. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi put it most powerfully on New Years day; 'The only adequate religious response is to say 'God, I do not know why this terrifying disaster has happened, but I do know what you want of us: to help the afflicted, comfort the bereaved, send healing to the injured, and aid to those who have lost their livelihood and homes.'[7]

[1] <http://cybereditions.com/aldaily>

[7] Jonathan Sacks, The Times, January 1st 2005