

### 1. The Headlines and the Comment

The 9/11 event in America was one which could be ascribed to (and was ascribed to) “the force of evil in the world”. It was the work of madmen bent on obscene objectives, the fruit of hatred and anger. For a great number of people it was possible to leave out any reference to God, and simply assume he was not involved in that event. A great many churchmen, particularly in America, took that view: by looking at man’s inhumanity to man it was possible to excuse the Almighty. It was a view which prevailed despite the presence of some who felt strongly there was an issue with the nature of God that had to be addressed, and some sort of judgement might be involved.

The Tsunami waves, however, are clearly in a different category. They simply cannot be explained away in terms of human hatred or madmen. They cannot even be explained as the consequence of thoughtless human ecological behaviour: they were not, for instance, the result of humanly generated global warming. On the contrary the origins of those waves lay in the very depths of the ocean, at a point of known geological friction between tectonic plates, way beyond any human influence. As a leader in a daily national said at the time, “a sudden unprecedented surge by the Indian Ocean is as near to a pure ‘event’ as one can get”. It was very easy for some such phrase as “the hand of God” to spring into the mind. Another newspaper leader went so far as to explain it as “the wrath of nature”, but would never have dared to go as far as using the words “the wrath of God”. In the circumstances that seemed, of course, too outrageous to consider, let alone take seriously. It was insulting to the victims, and involved a concept that belonged, as yet another leader put it, only to “loonies” at the fringe.

Yet the question of God’s place in it inevitably emerged. If God is God he cannot possibly be involved in such wasteful cruelty and distress, but if, on the other hand, he does exist he cannot but be involved. If God is the creator and sustainer of nature, he cannot be entirely free from some responsibility for such appalling events. Rather than face such a difficulty it might be easier and more logical to think that he cannot exist. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury was reported (albeit wrongly) as saying it had made him lose faith in God a bit. Such events must be a gross contradiction to what God has to be – if God is not simply all love, grace, goodness and kindness, then he cannot somehow be God. He cannot be thought to “judge”; certainly not to judge like that! Or can he?

### 2. The Heartache.

Such are the issues raised. They are raised, however, in a context which is very different from an academic philosophical or theological discussion. People’s feelings are involved much more than their minds. They are thinking emotionally. There is a sense of horror, of disbelief, of trauma. Small children are snatched from their parents’ arms, a husband watches his wife drown, and huge numbers of grotesque corpses are washed up on a beach. Numbness, helplessness and grief are the feelings that predominate. It is not academic! Beyond the initial shock, however, the heart demands some kind of answer, and it is driven naturally and ultimately to the question, “how can this possibly be allowed to happen?” The heart instinctively fastens on to the idea that there is something amiss here. It is a question at the deepest level.

Moments like these, however, call first for compassion and empathy, not pat answers. It is important to sit with people in a time of grief and shock, without being too quick to speak. That much was very evident in the case of Job after all his afflictions. His “comforters” said nothing for a long time. Indeed it was sometime before even God spoke to Job about his trauma, though, when he did, it had to be a word of rebuke. The rebuke, however, proved to be a healing word. Perhaps the most gratifying and helpful thing, therefore, in the aftermath of the disaster has been the huge outflow of genuine support shown by so many individuals personally. Love and support was the immediate and important need. Perhaps we need to reflect that if, indeed, it was the “hand of God” that released the waves, it was equally the “hand of God” that released the world’s response.

**“How can this possibly be allowed to happen”**

Nonetheless, at some point, God’s place in such tragedies as the Tsunami disaster has to be worked through. The question of “How can this possibly be allowed?” has to be answered. This is neither new nor easy in Christian experience. There is, of course, an easy response, one offered to Job by his wife: “curse God and die!” In saying this she was speaking exactly

how she “felt” – it was her heart speaking more than her mind. She was so hurt, so incensed by the loss of family and home. It was understandable, but best met as Job met it; silently, and with his eyes still on God. There are others who are eager, if not actually to curse God, at least to say, “I told you so – this proves there is no God!” Their view is that we live in a violent world of random chance and we are on a random journey to nowhere. Eventually we all die, and true wisdom is to grab what pleasure you can while the ride lasts, not forgetting to do what little bit you can for your neighbour. It counsels us to avoid the absurdities involved in thinking about God. But this, like every answer that cuts God out, ends ultimately in negativism, disillusionment and despair.

### 3. Facing the Problem – the Jewish Experience

The Jewish nation has gone through many traumas in its 3000 year history. Two of those traumas stand out above all the others. The first was the loss of their land, their temple and their monarchy amid scenes of indescribable horror and destruction as the nation was overrun by the human waves of Babylonian armies. Those armies killed and destroyed all in their path; women and children, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, royalty and peasant. As those violent, human waves receded they took with them the vast majority of the survivors of Jerusalem, and washed them relentlessly into the oblivion of exile. It was quick, devastating and overwhelming. Nothing was left. That was in 587 B.C. The second trauma was the Holocaust of the last century (the greatest of all the Jewish traumas). In both traumas the great question in the nation was “where was God?” Not all the Jewish people were inclined to jettison God in order to find the answer. An answer was worked out in the case of the first trauma, the exile. No satisfactory answer has yet been worked out in the case of the second: perhaps it is still too close.

As the Babylonians overran the kingdom of Judah, the Jews believed to the very last that they would be safe. Jerusalem was the City of God, David's line was God's chosen kingship, the Temple was God's dwelling place on earth and the Jews were his own chosen people. He would take care of his own, and their enemies would not prevail. But their enemies did prevail: destruction, death, horror, slavery, oppression, and exile actually happened. As they were marched off in chains through the city where scarcely one stone was left on another, the awful and haunting question was "How could God have allowed this?"

In exile, and beyond it, the question raised by the trauma was resolved. The solution is written on page after page of the Old Testament, and it has become one of the most important themes to run through that book. For the Old Testament, as we know it, was assembled in the aftermath of the exile, and though it is based on documents and material which go right back to the time of the kings and even to Moses, it bears on every page the revelation which the Jews received as to why they suffered so much. This revelation, this theme, was simply that all that had happened to them had been the consequence of their sin. They had been at fault with God, who had allowed to happen to them only what he had warned would happen to them if they rejected him.

The starting point for this rethink was the acceptance of the validity and accuracy of the prophetic voice that had been in the nation during the century and a half that had seen the destruction of both Judah and Israel. Those prophets had warned and warned of the national disobedience and the devastating judgement that would inevitably come if it continued. At the time their prophecies had been abhorred and abused by their contemporaries, but now the very oracles which had been so despised and so violently rejected were providing the answers to the nation's deepest question. Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, shortly before the debacle of the Babylonian conquest had sat listening to the scrolls of Jeremiah's prophecies, a comprehensive statement of warning to the nation, and had deliberately and systematically burned them on the fire in front of him. But now, following the exile, those same prophecies were again being collated and were to become the clue to a fresh and deeper understanding of God and his ways.

**"the Old Testament bears on every page the revelation which the Jews received as to why they suffered so much"**

The fact is that what Jeremiah, and with him Ezekiel, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and the others, had said had proved to be so devastatingly accurate that they simply could not be ignored by those genuinely seeking answers. What they had said about God's judgement now gave a major insight into the meaning and course of the history of the Jewish kingdom. They found fresh evidence in their national history that godliness and obedience to God brought prosperity and peace, whilst apostasy and lawlessness brought distress and suffering. Whilst their search for an answer strengthened their knowledge that they were indeed a chosen people, and had been given a land, it sharply reminded them that they were called by a holy God who would not look lightly on evil and would not tolerate it amongst his people. They simply could not get away from this stark truth. This renewed understanding was not seen as in any way contradictory to an understanding of a God who is full of love, mercy and compassion. They certainly saw a great deal of these aspects of God in the writings of the prophets. But God was holy, and worked in judgement. Thus, whilst the generation that suffered the trauma of exile was for the most part unable to accept that God was indeed at work in the trauma, a later generation was forced to a very different conclusion by the sheer weight of the prophetic evidence of judgement, and enshrined their new understanding for ever in what has become Scripture.

#### **4. The Conclusions for Today**

God judges. He also warns of greater judgements by means of smaller judgements. He warns not only Jews, but all nations, and warns them directly. He warns by words and he warns by natural calamity. These are the major premises that have come out of the deep heart searching of the Jews.

God warns nations directly. That is very important. He warned them directly through the great prophets just as he warned the Jews. His words to them were recorded in the writing up of the Old Testament. He still warns the nations. It is an interesting fact, however, that the warnings which were given were not always in the form of words but in the form of disasters, both human and natural. The Old Testament prophets pointed this out and sought to make people conscious of the fact that God spoke through such disasters. Joel's prophecy, for example, takes its beginning from a devastating plague of locusts, which is quite clearly portrayed as an affliction from God on a godless people. Hosea states that "the land mourns and the people waste away (drought and famine)" because of the "cursing, lying and murder in the land" (4:1-3). Amos puts the case very clearly: when speaking for God he says God gave drought and famine, blight and mildew, locusts and plague and still could not get the people to acknowledge him. Jeremiah (30 times) and Ezekiel (12 times) make frequent use of the triple nature of judgement, "sword, famine, and plague". When nations do not have the prophets of God, God still speaks, therefore. His language is disasters, for that alone seems able to penetrate the heart.

#### **5. Epilogue.**

An Irishman who had spent his life as a labourer gave his verdict on the Tsunami: "it's meant as a warning to us all". He did not judge the victims; he felt we were all just like them. He would not stand aloof to say "It was a judgement on them", but he knew that God was speaking, and that the message was directed to him and to us. It could justly happen to us. That was an exemplary attitude to adopt. Instinctively, he knew that what had happened had meaning. He was not without compassion for the sufferers, but neither was he blind to our lack of innocence. Like the Jews prior to their exile, we have grossly underestimated the seriousness of our predicament before God. We unconcernedly walk in evil ways, as though it were of no consequence to the God of this world. When we cease to listen to our conscience, the warnings about those consequences can come in no other form than episodes that horrify us, and even make us curse.

The Tsunami, however, has spoken to the world, not just to a part of it. The world knows, the world has seen it, not just one nation. It is a prophetic marker at the beginning of the new century. It was a judgement in itself, but, more sobering, it was in the nature of a judgement to warn of what could yet happen to nations if they continued to "defile the earth".