

Where is God in this? Some thoughts on the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan

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There are several theologies of suffering embedded in the Old Testament, the most common of which is that suffering is punishment from God for human sinfulness. This is the theme, for instance, of the Book of Job where Job's friends blame his predicament on some secret sin. It is still frequently encountered today. Some years ago when the controversial cleric David Jenkins was consecrated bishop in York Minster, a short time later part of the minster was destroyed by fire. Some Christians held that this was divine punishment inflicted on the Church of England for promoting such a man to a position of leadership. Again when Princess Diana was killed in 1997, some Christians again claimed it was punishment for her lifestyle and each time a volcano erupts someone somewhere claims it to be a punishment. In 1980, for instance, the Mount St. Helens eruption in the USA was, in the view of one radio evangelist, punishment for the consumption of strong liquor. There are many other examples I could cite. Such a theology of suffering as divine punishment is problematic. It is in fact fundamentally flawed. If God kills sinful people by means of the Mount St Helens eruptions, or partially destroys York Minster, or has a hand in the death of a young princess and mother, why did he not intervene to protect the innocent in the Holocaust, the killing fields of Cambodia and in the coastal regions of Japan during the recent earthquake and associated tsunami?

If the books of the Old Testament are placed in date order, rather than the order they appear in our pew bibles, then a new theology of suffering can be seen to emerge. This is expressed in the so called 'servant songs' of Isaiah where the servant figure, who for Christians often equated with the future Messiah, is described as a 'man of suffering' who is 'acquainted with grief'. This idea of a suffering God is even more clearly drawn in some of the even later books contained in the Apocrypha. It is, however, the life and teaching of Jesus that gives the lie to God being a figure of punitive violence. On two separate occasions Jesus upbraids the disciples for expressing such a mistaken understanding of God's action in the world.

'Those eighteen who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?' The disciples ask. 'I tell you no!' Jesus replies (Luke 13: 4). 'As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned', said Jesus (John 9: 1-3).

It is not only in Christ's teaching that the idea of punishment is refuted, but the crucifixion is also central to any Christian understanding of human suffering. Working in the shadow of the Holocaust and within the context of the collective guilt of the German people for the Nazi regime, the theologian Jürgen Moltmann argues that the cross is the Christian answer to suffering. In the book *The Crucified God*, Moltmann argues - in

what to my mind is the most significant theological book published during the last 50 years - that when Christ in utter desolation cries out 'my God my God why have you forsaken me', this represents the supreme moment of God's identification with the human condition. This is God's son on the cross: we too are his children. God does not will suffering, but shares it as any loving parent would share the suffering of a child.

Although we will never fully understand why a baby dies, why there was no divine intervention to prevent the Holocaust and why so many die in disasters, we can have absolute assurance that God shares in our suffering, grief, illness and despair. As we know that this is not God's last word on the issue, for we can look forward to the light and eternal life promised by the resurrection. I ask you to reflect on two passages of scripture, that we often read at funerals. St. Paul writing to the Romans states 'I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. God loves us in our suffering. From St. John 'Jesus said, I am the resurrection, and I am the life'. This is our hope for the future.



Natural disasters – like the Japanese earthquake – occur through the operation of geological processes, though even here human sinfulness in the form of poor living standards has a hand in many catastrophes in countries of the economically less developed world. There is a clear corporate sinfulness in disparities between rich and poor at the global scale and this is reflected in disaster losses. Physical laws control the universe, it may well be the best possible world, but poorly constructed and maintained buildings located in unsuitable areas kill people in earthquake zones, not earthquakes themselves or the tidal waves associated with them.

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This is the answer to undeserved suffering: everything else is not authentic Christian teaching.

David Chester April 2011