

The Disaster in Haiti—Where is God?

Disasters of the type that we have witnessed in Haiti this week always raise the question, for Christians as well as others, ‘where was God in all this?’ We can’t blame human beings for an earthquake; it’s what insurance companies used to call an ‘act of God’, and I’m sure all of us found ourselves thinking at some point, ‘if there’s a God, how could this happen? Why would God allow such things?’ I read a letter to a newspaper after the Tsunami a few years ago that said that after such a disaster as that, the intelligent person must either conclude that there is no God, or that God is in fact not a very nice person—I’m toning down the writer’s language a bit.

That’s a natural thing to think, if we only have our own thoughts to guide us; but those of us who believe that we have God’s word about all things in the Bible will, I hope, think about what God’s word says, and commend it to others.

And there are two things that God tells us that seem to me to be important to remember as we think about these things. And they’re important to remember not just because we want to comfort ourselves, but because every one of us here has a responsibility to remind

others of them, too. Especially when we hear someone in some way or other blaming God for all this. So please do remember these things, and be ready to repeat them. There will probably be a quiz on this—not from me, but from people you know or will meet.

The first thing to remember is that God tells us that man's disobedience to God doesn't just affect the disobedient person, it affects every one and every thing. Every *thing*—the first thing God said to Adam after he disobeyed Him was 'what have you done? The ground is cursed because of you'. Remember the words in Paul's letter to the Romans, 8.19–22, p 800 of the pew Bible: *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

Now Paul was a professor type, so let me put that in words of one syllable for the rest of us. *Creation*, all created things, animals, birds, fish, trees, flowers, the grass, the rocks, the air, the sea, is *waiting eagerly* for the sons of God to show up. Not Son, but sons: not Jesus, but the rest of the children of God. Now that can't mean

human beings generally, the way we're all children of God, because in that sense we're already here, revealed already; so it must be the children of God in that special sense that John talks about in the gospel passage we heard over Christmas: *to all who receive Jesus God gave the right to become children of God... children born of God, born again.* The created world is eagerly waiting for human beings to put their trust in Jesus, to become the human beings God really created us to be!

Because creation was *subject to* all the same consequences that human beings were when they disobeyed God; man's disobedience didn't just lead to problems for us, but for the whole creation. God didn't create the earth to quake, or catch fire, or freeze, or flood, He didn't stock it with viruses and bacteria, He didn't make some plants poisonous and some animals deadly; all those things became deadly to us, and we became deadly to them, because of our disobedience. And God allowed this, even though it was not creation's *own choice... in the hope that creation will soon be liberated from its bondage and enjoy the glorious freedom that will come when we become the children of God.* God allowed all creation, including us, to suffer the consequences of turning away from God, because He was sure we would turn back to Him as soon as He gave us the opportunity, in Jesus, and then everything would be put right, for us and for all creation. That's why creation is waiting *eagerly* for

us, because God is confident that we won't turn down His offer of a new start.

So it wasn't God Who sent earthquake and death.

They're the result of human disobedience. We cannot blame God. Even the idea that this tragedy is 'collateral damage' resulting from God doing some great thing we don't understand won't do: God hates all this as much as we do, it breaks His heart just as it breaks ours.

That's the first thing to remember: sin affects all of creation, not just us. We're horrified when we see it up close like this, but in fact it's visible every day. More than 140,000 people die, many of them in circumstances just as tragic as these, every single day, but we manage not to think about it—until something like this happens. Sin affects all of creation.

The second thing to remember is for when you hear people say, 'but God could stop it, couldn't He?' He could stop not just earthquakes and tidal waves but murders and robberies, war and violence, He could stop it all in a single second. And that's true, He could. But the only way He could do that would be to take away our free will, to turn us into creatures that had no choice but to live the way He planned for us. And then we wouldn't be human beings, but computers, robots doing what we were programmed to do, looking a bit like living things, but in fact lifeless, dead inside, mere

machines. In other words, God could only stop all this by destroying us, turning us into soul-less machines, and that would make the situation worse, not better. If you really imagine what it would be like to never do anything from your own free choice, you'll see that.

So the second thing to remember is that God has done everything He can do so that there never need be disasters like this, or the ones that take place every day that we try not to think about. He's given us a way out. The way out is Jesus. But until we take that way out, things can't get better. And while there are people here and there who have put their trust in Him, it's still just a minority, even in so-called Christian countries.

So as we think about what we should do in the wake of this tragedy, we must think on all the various levels involved. In the short term, of course, we send help. If you want to make a contribution through the church, you can put a cheque in the plate today, and mark it 'Haiti' and we'll pass it on. Episcopal Relief and Development is already sending aid, and we'll just send ours to be added to theirs.

But in the long term, we need to tell people about what God has done in Jesus. Remember the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the lion and the calf, a child and a poisonous snake in Isaiah 11? Animals that

we only know as enemies will be play-mates when Christ's Kingdom comes. And in Isaiah 35 the idea is taken one step further: even the earth itself will experience this new and greater life. 'The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom, it will shout for joy. It will rejoice because the land itself will know the glory of God. This is what we are promised when all human beings are reconciled to God. God's promise to us in Christ is, ultimately, the promise of a world with no more earthquakes, no more tidal waves, no more epidemics and plagues, no more wars, no more injustice and oppression. That's why the Wise Men sought Jesus, why wise men and women still seek Him today, and why wise Christians don't keep Him to themselves, but tell others about Him.

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