

**Sermon preached by Professor Margaret Spufford
at St Edward's Church, Cambridge, on Passion Sunday Morning, 2005**

Passion Sunday, the 5th Sunday in Lent, opens the last fortnight in Lent, during which we focus on the Passion of our Lord. It culminates in the triumph of Easter, but traverses the brutalities of Holy Week and Good Friday itself. The word 'passion' has changed meaning: we now use it to express suffering and pain, but originally it means the period in which the Lord was treated as an object, passive, and exposed to whatever the hands of men chose to do to him!

This Passion Sunday, I want to talk about two apparently irreconcilable truths which I had been thinking about since Christmas. You will remember on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we were joyfully celebrating the Feast when Christ was born, the Incarnation. We are meditating the extraordinary miracle of God being willing to empty himself, to come to earth as an utterly vulnerable baby, trusting in our good will, to share the world he made with us, as a man. In fact, in this next fortnight to Easter, we see what we did to this man, who was God. The second half of Holy Week is almost intolerable, for we are obliged, in our love for him, to focus on what **was** done to him. And he was tortured to death. I did not myself approve of Mel Gibson's film of the Passion and, which made such a stir last year, for it seemed to me that the film **only** about torture (which is what it was) was not appropriate as a vehicle to carry good news. It never arrived at Easter, which is our greatest Feast and our true meaning. Nevertheless, I met people who were **not** practising Christians and who are not therefore exposed in Holy Week to the regular reading of the Passion Gospels, to whom that film expressed **part** of a truth. They said they were grateful. I'm still not sure. Nevertheless in Holy Week, we, who **do** know the story, are forced to contemplate what was done to that (young) man, who had given himself, as a helpless baby, into the hands of men and women. I was reading an archaeological report, which recorded the finding of the skeleton of a crucified criminal in Roman Palestine. Instead of the pierced feet, which we are accustomed to in paintings of our Lord, this crucified man had had his ankles crossed and a great nail driven right through birth joints. I apologise if I shock you - it made me feel extremely sick. But we don't need to go and see a film about torture after that, do we? And please let me just remind you that Good Friday is not the end of Holy Week.

So the willing vulnerability of God, undertaken out of love for us, is the first of the two truths I had been considering since Christmas Day.

But, you will remember this year's Boxing Day followed as ever, speedily after Christmas Day. This year it brought us the tsunami. At the last reckoning, three hundred thousand people died in the great waves round the shores of the Indian Ocean, when two tectonic plates of the Earth's surface rubbed up against each other, just a little underneath it. You probably remember Voltaire couldn't cope with the death of around 50,000 people in the great earthquake which destroyed Lisbon in 1755. His satire on current popular philosophical theory which might account for it, and still retain the concept of a good and loving creator, *Candide*, recalls his anger at those explanations! 'Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds' says his buffoon of a philosopher. It seems the Lisbon earthquake was even more offensive and intolerable because it happened on All Saints' Day, when the Churches were packed, and all the congregations were killed - presumably because of the stone vaults collapsing on them. The customers at the brothels, which were only made of wood, did much better! Voltaire pointed out the irony.

So if Voltaire couldn't cope with the Lisbon earthquake, how can I possibly cope with the tsunami? How especially, can I reconcile this image of a helpless baby, born out of love for all people, with what

we believe that baby to have been, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, 'without whom none was not anything may that was made', according to St John. There was a great deal of argument about the person of Christ in the early Christian world. The main problems seem to have been solved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when most of the wrangles seem to have been composed into the doctrine that there was 'one Christ, in two natures, without confusion, without change, without a vision, without separation'. Perfect God and perfect man. If this is so, He, the Second Person of the Trinity, maker of all things, **intended**, and was present at, what cosmologists call the 'Big Bang', the beginning of the universe. I have marvelled at the photographs relayed to us by the Hubble telescope. These images show us the births and deaths of huge stars, supernova, and galaxies. There are swelling constellations of energy and matter, nuclear furnaces, foreign to anything we know, or can know from experience as human beings. **Some** physicists tell us that this enormous universe seems to have been ideally constituted to create carbon-based life, which takes at least 15 billion years, and is what we are. Such people suggest that the evolution and inner beauty of the universe itself, and then of ourselves on our own tiny speck of star, may in itself be an argument for a thinking, caring creator. I realise I am trying to bring two completely dissimilar forms of thought together here. The doctrines of the Council of Chalcedon do not normally appear in close conjunction to the explanations of cosmology in popular physics. But I have been forced to think like this ever since Boxing Day.

Supposing we allow, for a minute, the supposition of a loving creator, the Second Person of the Trinity, as active in this terrifyingly large universe - how then is our small planet subject to the movement of tectonic plates and earthquakes, if He is indeed loving? Well, the universe, and our star are still growing, changing, and subject to constant movement. Ourselves, too, our own bodies, are subject to constant change, and in it lies the possibility of both good and evil. The loving Creator we postulate is still active in all this but does not in general override how his creation works. It is part of the nature of love, as all parents know, to allow growth to happen without being over-controlled - or under-controlled either, I suspect that allowing the Earth's crust to behave in accordance with its nature, to move, even to our disadvantage, is allied to the same logical development in human beings. In ourselves 'exactly the same bio-chemical processes that enable cells to mutate, making evolution possible, are those that allow cells to become cancerous and generate tumours... The possibility of disease... is the necessary cost of life.'

How then are we to live believing in the love of God who does not perform miracles to save us from earthquakes or disease? We return to the actions on earth of the Second Person of the Trinity. We know he persistently healed disease, though we don't have evidence for His dealing with natural disasters. I find it difficult however, not to believe He would have been working to alleviate them. Above all, we know from his acceptance of suffering and a horrible death, that we are just about to try to live through in awareness with Him, that His love extends as far as accepting His death for us, without blame or rancour. Part of His work relieving the tsunami is surely in the outpouring of feeling that has sent so much aid. We are His agents. But above all else, He surely shares our pain and the pain of those victims. You remember the Aberfan disaster, when a wet pit-heap in one of the Welsh valleys slid down the hillside and engulfed the primary-school at the bottom, and killed the children and their teachers? Canon Vanstone gave a sermon the next morning, in which he said 'you want to know where Christ was? He was at the bottom of that hillside, underneath the pit heap, with all those children'. Only if Christ shares our pain, and the pain of the thousands of the tsunami victims, can we worship him. But we know, from the events of Passiontide that he does willingly and fully share our pain. So we can worship him, Creator and sufferer with us, because of the events we are going to live through with him, all through Passiontide, to Easter Day.