

The Tsunami Disaster

**Sermon Preached on the evening of Sunday 16th January 2005
at St Edward King and Martyr, Cambridge
by the Revd Dr Fraser Watts, Vicar-Chaplain**

This evening I want to share some thoughts about the recent disaster in the Indian Ocean. All of us have been deeply moved by the horrific scenes we have seen on our television screens of huge walls of water sweeping in from the Indian Ocean, devastating everything in their paths, destroying every building along the coastline, and carrying many people to their deaths. Such sights naturally and rightly raise questions. How can such a thing be allowed to happen, how can a good and loving God have made a world in which there are Tsunami, and where is he while all this destruction and suffering is happening?

These are deep and imponderable questions and, of course, I have no easy or adequate answers to them. Nevertheless, the questions well up with an extraordinary power, and we have no alternative but to wrestle with them. I want to share some thoughts, however inadequate they may be, to help you in your own struggle with these issues.

Christians often say they believe in a God who is omnipotent, all-powerful. I think I know what they mean, but it seems to me a misleading way of putting things. It implies a God who has the world under tight control, and can do anything he pleases with it at any moment. That is not the kind of God I believe in. If the flood disaster has led more people to disbelieve in such a God then, in a sense, I welcome that.

We need to steer a path between, on the one hand, a totally controlling God and, on the other the God that became rather fashionable in the eighteenth-century, one who set up the world in the first place but then simply sat back and left it to run. The God I believe in is one who has not only given rise to the world but who is intimately involved with it at every moment of its existence, and on whom the world is utterly dependent. However, he doesn't control it; he has given it its freedom.

People often talk about having God having given people their freedom, but I want to push that further. I believe that God has given freedom to the whole of his creation. The continental plates that collided in the Indian Ocean are not under his control in their every move, any more than you and I are under his control. He steers and guides, and is always engaged with whatever happens. However, I don't believe in a God who has every movement of the created world in his grip.

The next question that wells up is whether God could not have made the world better, why he did not design it in a way that had no earthquakes and no volcanoes, no natural disasters of any kind. That is, in a sense, a technical question that goes outside my competence. What we need to understand is whether it would have been possible to design a world with no natural disasters, but which would still have been as fruitful as our world. There are some things that are impossible, even for God, because they are internally inconsistent. Not even God could make a four-sided triangle, because it is just a contradiction in terms. Maybe, in a similar way, it would be inherently contradictory to have a world that was as fruitful as our earth but never had any earthquakes or volcanoes.

What we do know, scientifically, is that our world is remarkably fine-tuned to be fruitful. If you tinker, even fractionally, with the values of the basic forces such as gravity and electromagnetism you destroy the fruitfulness of the earth. No doubt this earth could have been free of natural disasters,

but then it might have been as sterile as the rest of the planets in our solar system, and probably beyond. This remarkably fruitful planet on which you and I live is one that seems to be alive, that moves and lives and breaths. Maybe it is part of the price of it being so fruitful that it is a living planet on which occasionally there can be the kind of collusion that happened so catastrophically in the Indian Ocean on 26th December.

Now I want to turn to the question of where is God in all the suffering and devastation that has happened. I believe that God is present in the suffering in the Indian Ocean, just as he is present in all suffering. We will shortly be commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. I believe that God was present in the appalling suffering that took place there, and I believe he was present to in the sudden, terrifying and horrific deaths of those who died around the Indian Ocean, and in the grief and despair of those who have survived and seen their world totally destroyed.

It is crucial here that Christ himself suffered. The mixed and often hostile reactions to his good work were no doubt often a cause of suffering, and he suffered appalling physical brutality at his crucifixion, as the recent film, *The Passion of Christ*, made so clear. There is a kind of empathy between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of every human being in horrific disasters like that which occurred in the Indian Ocean. Christ knows what suffering is like; he has been there. His empathy with those who suffer leaps across the divide of time and space as he suffers again with all those who suffered at the hands of the Tsunami on Boxing Day.

Christ is also present, as he always is, working to bring good out of the appalling devastation that has happened around the Indian Ocean. I have no doubt that there were many examples of individual people reacting to the unfolding disaster with astonishing love and generosity to those around them. We may not know the details, but I have no doubt that such incidents occurred. The God in whom I believe is always working to bring good out of evil and suffering, and I believe he was working through all those who exemplified his loving purposes in the way they reacted to the disaster.

I also believe that God has been present in the compassionate response of so many people around the world. In Britain, an astonishingly high a proportion of households have donated to the disaster appeal, and the sums raised have outstripped all expectations. It is unprecedented for Britain to have responded with such united and extraordinary compassion to an international disaster. The need for international aid has never been higher in the public consciousness and may also provide the political will to work to alleviate the appalling poverty that exists in many parts of Africa. The public will to help those who have suffered in the Indian Ocean is so strong that no political party has stood out against it. Britain has, in a new way, become a compassionate society as a result of this disaster. That, I believe, is another way in which God has been present in these last weeks, working to bring good out of evil, as he always does.

These are not adequate answers to the questions that well up in us about such an appalling disaster. Some questions have no adequate answers, though it is right to ask them with deep insistence all the same. Our questions about the flood disaster are probably those kinds of questions. It is simply human to ask the questions we do, faced with such appalling suffering, and I believe that God is at work in the way we wrestle with those questions. They are another way in which he is helping to bring good out of disaster.