

SERMON – TRINITY SUNDAY & THEODICY
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, WITLEY
18 MAY 2008

One can't but have enormous compassion at the moment for the people of southeast Asia. This last week we've seen the devastating earthquake that hit China. And the week before that, it was the appalling cyclone that wrought havoc in Burma.

I don't know about you but I've found myself on occasion recently asking how can there be a loving God if such evils exist? And the question is compounded when one looks not just at natural disasters but at moral disasters too – the whole question of human evil. There are so many examples of that, that we're almost overwhelmed by them. It may be terrorist outrages or it may be that likeable young Roman Catholic lad Jimmy Mizzen, who had his throat slashed in a South West London shop when he was minding his own business. How can there be a loving God?

Well, even the greatest brains of Christian history have only been able to go so far in answering that question. Unfortunately, it's a mystery. But we can say some things, I'll begin with natural disasters. Why does God allow them? Let's take earthquakes as an instance. The landmasses of the earth, as you know, sit on moving tectonic plates. When the plates collide or grind together you get earthquakes. So let's imagine a world with no earthquakes. Over hundreds of millions of years the wind, sea and rain would erode mountains and uplands until everything was submerged in the ocean. A pretty hopeless situation. But the crashing of those tectonic plates stops that happening. It causes earthquakes, yes, but it also forces up mountains. And volcanoes running alongside earthquake zones send up magma and create new land. So in order to have a world at all for people to live in, you need earthquakes and the destruction that goes with them. Their presence doesn't invalidate the existence of God.

But why, then, didn't God create a world where people aren't hurt by earthquakes? Well, He could constantly warn us of every bad things that's going to happen. But that would make Him responsible if anyone ever got hurt and we ourselves could never develop as responsible beings. Or God could make buildings go suddenly as light as a feather when they collapse on people – and indeed He could make the hammer with which I drive in a nail as soft as jelly when it hits my thumb. But then why should we ever bother to be careful? In the end, the price of a universe where the innocent don't suffer heart-rending tragedy from natural events seems to be the loss of our freedom and responsibility and the end of any semblance of a rational, ordered world. This world seems to be the only out possible. Now, what about evils caused by people?

Why has God made human nature selfish so we're capable of harming others? Why couldn't He have made us all naturally kind and generous? Again, there's a scientific answer. If there's only one piece of meat available and I eat it at your expense, it improves my chances of surviving and reproducing. The selfish are more likely to leave more descendants than the generous. And yet these same forces have given rise to speech and intelligence and made us who we are. And we also have the strange capacity for love, altruism and justice.

And if God did prevent us from being temperamentally selfish or cruel, then we could no longer choose to be generous or kind. We would merely be robots not people. And perhaps it's not actually possible – even for God – to make someone love. By definition, it has to be free choice. So in order to be free to do good, we have to be free to do evil.

This business of choice extends to natural disasters – natural evil – too. It's true that they happen despite us, because it's in the nature of reality that they must happen. But we can choose how to deal with them. We know where the earthquake, cyclone, tsunami and famine regions are and we can take action to protect people. If we choose. It seems, for example, that the Burmese

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government gave inadequate warning of the impending cyclone to its people. And their subsequent behaviour – blocking aid, barely lifting a finger themselves to help and trumpeting their generosity in the media when they did – leaves one speechless.

So in answer to my first question, it seems that the world we have is, despite initial appearances, consistent with a loving God.

Bearing in mind that today is Trinity Sunday, that leads me to a second question. Against the backdrop of the world's evil, what does it mean if that same God, at a point in history, because a human being – Jesus, the second person of the Trinity?

I believe God became a man to show us that this world is not all that there is and that there are spiritual realities. God was willing to enter into the world's evil, willing to share our conditionality and vulnerability to show us the bigger picture, to show us the beyond. His own suffering – remembering that Jesus was tortured to death – was neither pointless nor everlasting. Not pointless because it marked the defeat of the powers of darkness.

Not everlasting because the suffering ended and was followed by resurrection – the triumph of love over death. That in turn means that no human suffering will have the final word. That's no comfort to a child at the precise moment of being caught up in an earthquake, but God became one of us to show that death is not the end and beyond the pain there is a future. The victims of natural disaster and of murder are not ultimately obliterated.

What else does God becoming human mean? It means that, for all our sinfulness, evil and wickedness, human nature is actually fundamentally good. It means too that if God cared enough about people to become one of us, then that gives us incredible value. Every single person. And that should have a huge effect on how we treat others. Not only are we to imitate the God who we can now see in the flesh – imitate Him in His service of others – but we are to remember that in serving others we are doing nothing less than serving God Himself. Because He became human, God in Jesus was able to say, 'As you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.' And because Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit – the third person of the Trinity – to us, we don't have to do everything in our strength alone. As we heard in our first reading, the Spirit promises that those who drink Him in in prayer shall renew their strength, mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Lastly, all these things show you who you are and what your destiny is. Your human frame and human mind have such capacity that 2000 years ago they were able to contain the fullness of God! Get your head round that.

And when Jesus's earthly life was over, He took a human body and mind into the very centre of the godhead. There is now a human being at the heart of God. That means that our destiny seems to be nothing less than deification. We're being drawn into the Trinity. At which point, language and imagination break down and we can go no further.

It is for all these reasons that I am ultimately optimistic about the future, optimistic about people. Our television screens regularly show us visions of hell, as they have in recent times. But heaven is stronger than hell. And behind the scenes, the God of the Trinity is still there and working His purposes out.

Amen.