

WHERE IS GOD IN DISASTER?

People have been saying that the Indian Ocean disaster is “of biblical proportions”. Be that as it may, even the BBC has asked, “Where is God in this?” One suspects the reason they always ask this is so they can always find someone to answer, “Nowhere.” At one and the same time, it seems, God is proved by events both to be non-existent and cruel.

Yet those who claim to follow Christ ought to hear what *he* teaches about such catastrophes – and he teaches very directly indeed. The problem is, his teaching is not what people wish to hear and so now, as then, it is rejected.

In Luke 13, Jesus is asked about some Jewish worshippers brutally killed by the Roman governor, even as they sacrificed in the temple. Perhaps the people expected Jesus to accuse Pilate of tyranny. Perhaps they wanted him to say that God had punished secretly wicked people. Nowadays, we would want him to say they were just unlucky, and that God can’t control human cruelty.

Instead of all these, he turns the story back on his hearers. “They were not worse sinners than anyone else,” he says. “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” He then cites a second event – in this case an “act of God”. A tower-block has recently collapsed killing eighteen people. Jesus does not blame careless builders, nor especially wicked victims – though he does not call them innocent. He certainly sees nothing that calls his Father to account. Again, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Jesus clearly does not mean that sinners all suffer abnormal deaths, but that God holds us all to account. Human catastrophes, he says, are evidence that there *is* such a thing as final judgement, and that we should avoid it by admitting our sin and turning to God. That is not a popular idea nowadays – but it wasn’t then, either, which is why they crucified Jesus not long afterwards.

Does Jesus promote a cold, vindictive God? Not at all. He goes on (look it up!) to tell a parable, in which such tragedies are compared to the digging and fertilising that a good gardener does to try and save a tree that refuses to bear fruit year after year. He thinks of pulling it down now – but instead, out of compassion, does extraordinary things to save it. The fruit God is looking for in us is repentance and goodness. Will he find that, or will he find us cursing *him* for the troubles we witness, as is predicted in Revelation 16.8-11 and fulfilled in our newspapers?

Jesus says that each disaster that occurs demands a personal response from us. Part of that response is the compassion that should lead us to contribute whatever we can for the relief of hapless victims. But an equal part is to look into our own hearts and repent of the sin we find there, lest we too “all perish.”

Jon Garvey, Danbury Mission