

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Why, God?

Presented by Bob Smith

Two days after Boxing Day some years ago, I received an email from a minister friend in Phuket with the word “*safe*.” She had been holidaying there with her husband. The two of us had taken part in an emergency services exercise, some months ago, simulating a major bomb blast in Sydney with several hundred casualties. I remember us sitting around at the end of the first day talking about how we would be feeling if the real thing occurred. Well, now she knows how it feels.

She and her husband had been aboard a boat heading back into Phuket when they felt a large swell pass under them. That swell was the Tsunami and it wasn't until they reached the shore that they realised what had happened – the absolute devastation and the sight of hundreds of bodies. I'm sure that for her, as for most people, once the initial shock has passed and we have time to reflect on it all, it is difficult to avoid that question that has, from the beginning of recorded history, been the most troublesome theological dilemma - why does a loving and all powerful God allow such terrible things to happen?

In all situations of human disaster, but especially ones as overwhelming as that Boxing Day Tsunami and the devastating bushfires in Australia, after the initial numbness wears off, one question inevitably arises - where was God in all this? For people who do not believe in God there is no question; just a confirmation of their belief that there is no God. For people who are traumatised by grief or shock, their whole belief system in the presence of an almighty and loving heavenly father is severely shaken and may never recover. For others, that very same faith is the one thing that sustains them through it all more than anything else.

The problem is, of course, is that our Christian belief says that God is both all powerful and all loving. Disasters like this sometimes make us wonder if God didn't do anything about it because he couldn't, and therefore is not all loving. Over the centuries people have come up with all sorts of explanations for this dilemma. Some have just said, 'There is no God.' Others have offered theological explanations for why God has not seemed to get involved. Probably the most common has been, and still is that God is punishing people for their sins. This was the big argument that was around a few years ago when we first became aware of the developing Aids epidemic.

Many people saw this as a judgement on the promiscuity of the homosexual community. The trouble was that a whole lot of other people were and are suffering too; haemophiliacs, the wives of bi-sexual men, and a generation of children in Africa and Asia born with HIV or orphaned because their parents have died of it. Now while it is true that we reap what we sow, it is hard to understand how judgement figures in such widespread and indiscriminate disasters, particularly when the main victims are children.

There is a common belief held by some Christians that God will bring deliverance to those whom he favours, as for example in the Book of Exodus when the plagues fell on the Egyptians but not on their Hebrew slaves. I could be tempted to believe this in relation to my friend in Phuket. Though she herself is not claiming to be the beneficiary of any special deliverance from God that others didn't get, I'm sure that the thought of deliverance would have been in her mind and in the minds of her church members. And who am I to say that

it was not so? The problem is, why her and not all those thousands of children? It reminds me of Easter Sunday nineteen eighty one. I was with a community of young Christians who lived and witnessed in one of the most violent and deprived areas of New York; the South Bronx. As we concluded our worship we heard the news that a tornado had struck a town in Texas. The one building that it hit was a church full of worshippers. Around forty were killed, including children. I remember one of our group saying what we were all thinking; why the church on Easter of all days? Why not the saloon or the brothel or the offices of some money grubbing corporation? Whichever way you look at it, disasters like the one we are witnessing raise the biggest of all questions of faith.

The bushfire disaster raises again the age old question of *where was God in all this?* Naturally bring to mind John's Gospel which begins with those immortal words: *"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* And then a few verses later it continues; *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

This reference to Jesus as *the Word* identifies Jesus with a concept that was full of meaning to the people of that day. The Gospel is here telling us that the mind, the power and the very heart of God has come amongst us in Jesus. The essence of that mighty creative force - the deepest expression of God's love and feelings for us - are here amongst us in him. The Bible teaches that God came amongst in Jesus, and experienced the full range of human suffering. He was born in the most deprived and anxious of circumstances, persecuted from his earliest days and was a refugee for the first years of his life. He grew up in a poor, working family where starvation was always close at hand. Finally he experienced the very worst of persecution, betrayal, torture and one of the most dreadful forms of execution ever devised.

Reflecting on all this the Bible teaches us that God is the God who suffers with us. The book of Hebrews says; ***Because he himself suffered when he was tested, he is able to help those who are being tested.***" It is from this that we have derived the concept of *the Wounded Healer - the God who suffers with us.* We ask the question, ***Where was God when all this happened.*** The Bible says God was right there with those who were suffering, suffering with them. Now most of us would probably say, 'Well that all sounds very touchy/feely, but I would have preferred God to not have suffered and to have used his power to have prevented those people from suffering too. That's one that I can sympathise with, but have no easy answer for. All I can say is what the Scripture says, and what the experience of multitudes of people of faith through the ages say; that in their darkest moments they knew that God was there with them.

There is an interesting philosophical point about the experience of suffering. Every person who suffers only feels one person's load of pain. No-one feels ten person's pain, each feels their own. No-one feels the accumulated total - except God from whom all life came. The concept of God in Jesus as the wounded healer who suffers with us is an insight into the true nature of God that goes far beyond those more elementary ideas of a deity that either sends judgements from heaven upon the unrighteous, or who descends to change the laws of nature to deliver his favourites.

There is, however, one book of the Bible that addresses this puzzling subject. It is the book of Job in the Old Testament. The story begins with a description of him as a very wealthy and righteous man, blessed by God in all sorts of ways. The scene then shifts to Heaven where God summons the angels to his presence and Satan, formerly Lucifer, the archangel who rebelled against God, tells God that the only reason Job is a righteous man is because he knows God blesses him for being that way - it pays him to be righteous.

So God allows Satan to afflict Job to the extent that he loses all his wealth and children, and finally suffers some loathsome and agonising disease that causes his wife to drive him away. Then he is joined by his three best friends who try to comfort him by trotting out all the usual reasons for why these things happen - the very reasons you still hear from religious people today. They tell him not to lose faith. God only punishes the wicked and if he is innocent all will turn out well. Job listens and has the same reaction that I see in sufferers today who have to listen to the tripe that is often served up by well meaning people who have all the answers even though they don't know the question. His friends become increasingly shocked by Job's attitude and lay into him even more; while Job admits that he is not perfect, but can't understand why he, who has tried to be a righteous person, is suffering so terribly when other people who don't try seem to get off scot free.

The whole thing comes to a climax when God finally answers out of a gathering windstorm. It is a very strange sort of answer in which God bombards Job with all sorts of questions about the World and the Universe which Job cannot answer. In it God does not give Job a clear answer about why a relatively good person like him should be suffering so badly. Instead God says, in effect; '*Job, what do you know about running the Universe? There are some things I just can't explain to you because I am God and you are a man. You just wouldn't understand.*' And the important thing for us to note is that even though it didn't really answer Job's question, he was satisfied with what he got.

In this poetic narrative we see what is for us also the only response we can make to this greatest of all theological problems, short of unbelief or bitterness - the response of *faith*. There is no easy answer to the problem of overwhelming disaster that causes such suffering to so many people - most of them ordinary people just getting on with their lives, and many of them innocent children. Why didn't God intervene to prevent it? I don't know. But what I do believe is that God suffers with his people. In Jesus we see the essence of his heart and mind. He is the wounded healer.

The real question for us is not "*Why didn't God do something these disasters?*" but "*What are we going to do about it?*" The Church is "*the Body of Christ.*" We are the manifestation of his presence here on Earth. We are possessed of his Spirit and are the expressions of his eye to see, his heart to feel, and his hands to do.

The question for us always has to be, "*What does God want me to do?*" But there is one more thing we need to remember. Disasters, whether large or small, remind us of our mortality. They remind us that one day we shall all die; and even eighty years of life is less than a drop in the ocean of Eternity. The Book of Hebrews reminds us, "*Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*" Though this life is all we know, and we naturally feel that to lose it is to lose everything; the teaching of Jesus is that it is not everything. Our real life is beyond it. And no disaster can separate people of faith from that. All it can do is hasten it.

Father, amidst all our grief, suffering and questioning, help us to remember that you are the God who suffers with us and that in you we find our hope and strength. Amen.