

Sermon 2nd Sunday Before Advent

Typhoon Haiyan

Malachi 4 vv 1-6 p962, Psalm 98, II Thessalonians 3 vv 6-13 p1190, Luke 21 vv 5-19 p1056

But ye brethren, be not weary in well doing.

We've all been horrified by the scenes of devastation in the Philippines caused by Typhoon Haiyan. It has perhaps had a greater impact on us in this parish because of our link with Paul and Charitas Cho, our CMS mission partners in Manila. They themselves are safe, but there are millions of people in the Philippines who have lost everything – homes and livelihoods, even their own lives. I think we know what we've got to do. We've got to pray and we've got to provide practical help for the Filipino people. We may well think that the best way we can do that is by a monetary contribution to the relief effort and today and over the next couple of weeks we shall have a collection plate in church. We'll channel our contribution through CMS and envelopes are provided for those of you able to gift aid your contribution. Write *typhoon relief* on the envelopes to be sure the money is used as you intend. Loose money in the plates will also be sent to the Philippines via the Church Mission Society.

When we are informed about a terrible event like Typhoon Haiyan we ask why something like this should happen. It is natural for human beings to ask what is the reason for things. It is how we have advanced so far in knowledge. It is the basis of Science and of every other academic discipline. Why do things happen? Why are things the way they are? If you are not asking why Typhoon Haiyan happened, might it be because there is a reason why you don't want to ask? You feel frustrated by the process of enquiring? You don't like what you think might be the answer?

Reason comes naturally to human beings and for many human beings the ultimate explanation for everything is God. Jesus is Λογος. God's people are λογικοι. It is in God that that things makes sense. It is as the people of God that human beings make sense. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God.* That may be why most human cultures are and always have been religious. Ultimately the world makes sense because it the creation of a Rational Mind. The Logic behind the universe, the Mind Which creates and sustains everything, is infinitely greater than any of our minds, but, like us, it is ultimately rational. It is Reason. He is Reason. In principle we feel that we ought to be able to make sense of things because everything that happens, happens in accordance with the plans of a Mind analogous to our minds, albeit that God is infinitely greater than we are.

But if God is the ultimate explanation for everything, then God must be responsible for Typhoon Haiyan and why ever would God allow, let alone cause, something as terrible as a typhoon? Some people would get God off the hook by saying that God has nothing to do with typhoons. They just happen. God isn't responsible. But if God isn't in that situation, why pray? If what has happened to the Philippines is outside of the providence of God, what hope can we offer to the Filipino people? Maybe we can help them to rebuild their homes and restart their economy, but what hope can we offer them for those who have died? How can we stand alongside them as they attempt to make sense of what has happened to them? What if it happens again and everything which has been painfully rebuilt is once more swept away by 200 mph winds and floods? Where can we find hope?

Some people of course would regard natural disasters as punishment for sin, but it can't be as simple as that. Millions of good people have suffered as a result of Typhoon Haiyan alongside any notorious sinners and no doubt there are millions of wicked people living today in parts of the world quite unaffected by typhoons or any other kind of natural disaster. Maybe you know some of them personally. Anyway we are all sinners insofar as we fail to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. We are all sinners. Only Jesus was tempted in all respects as we are and was yet without sin. As long ago as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pointed out to God (no less!) that it would be unjust to rain down fire on those wicked cities if there were even a few good people living in them. Human beings, like you, Abraham and me, recognise justice because God personifies justice and we are made in the image of God. Jesus warned the people of his own day not to think that eighteen unfortunate people who were crushed to death by a tower which collapsed in Jerusalem were any worse sinners than the rest of us or that some Galileans who were in the wrong place when Pilate's soldiers engaged in some indiscriminate blood-letting deserved to die any more than you or I do. The lesson Jesus derived from these events was, *Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.* (Luke 12⁵).

There is a connection between suffering and sin, but it is not a simple one. In today's Gospel reading Jesus speaks of various calamities which will come upon the world. Of those, war is obviously the result of human sin, but earthquakes are not. Famine may be the result of human sin if it is caused by warriors destroying crops or by greedy people hoarding the best of everything to themselves and forcing up prices beyond the reach of the poor, but famine may also be caused by bad weather, plagues of locusts or crop diseases. Similarly pestilence may be spread by war – sometimes deliberately. In the Middle Ages, corpses were catapulted into besieged cities to infect the defenders. Colonialists sometimes deliberately infected natives with diseases like measles to which they had no resistance. In C20 nations, including our own, built up stocks of biological weapons for potential use against our enemies. When we know that, for example, cholera is spread by poor sanitation, isn't it a sin if the rich and powerful in society neglect to provide clean water and adequate sewerage systems? But some plagues, like the not infrequent influenza epidemics the world endures, seem to occur irrespective of human vice or virtue. The people best placed to survive an earthquake, famine or plague are usually the rich with their better built houses in the most salubrious locations and their superior access to markets and the best available health care. If extremes of inequality are a manifestation of a sinful society, it is the poor who disproportionately suffer the punishment.

It is probably true that there would be no suffering in the world if there were no sin, but that is another matter – a general point which doesn't bear on particular cases. In the world to come, *They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes* (Revelation 7^{16&17}), but that time is not yet.

On the question of typhoons, some people do see a connection with human wrong-doing. If you believe that typhoons are exacerbated (if not caused) by global warming and that global warming is caused by humanity's reckless exploitation of the world's resources, then

humanity is to some extent responsible for what happened last week in the Philippines. Even so, there is no simple link between the perpetrators, the people who have burnt all this fossil fuel, and the victims, who in this case have mostly been people with a very much smaller carbon footprint than yours or mine.

An alternative to sin as a theological explanation of natural disaster is the idea of natural law, the laws of Science. Many people believe that it is an extraordinary fact that the universe supports life, particularly human life. If the constants were slightly different, if natural laws did not work very much as they in fact do, life would be impossible. This is called the anthropic principle. It means that it looks as if the universe were designed for human beings to live in and some people deduce from this anthropic principle that there is a Designer – God Who always intended that the universe should be our home. The argument goes that these natural laws have consequences and that the good consequences cannot be separated from the bad consequences. The laws which enable a well-designed plane to fly are the same laws which make a poorly designed plane crash. The weather systems by which God *sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain, the breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain* are the very same weather systems which sometimes cause typhoons and hurricanes, prolonged droughts, deep snowdrifts and devastating floods. If you look at things this way, God is responsible for typhoons, etc., but only in the sense that He has created a world in which the laws of science paint the wayside flower and light the evening star, in which winds and waves are predictably unpredictable, the birds are fed, and we, God's children, receive our daily bread, precisely because God doesn't break the laws that He has made. Things always do fall to earth with a force proportional to the product of their and the earth's mass and inversely proportional to the square of their distance from the earth whether an apple falling from a tree to go ultimately into the Harvest Supper pies or a carelessly dropped brick plunging towards a baby in a perambulator. Maybe. I'm not sure about that one and there isn't time to go into it further this morning and that leaves three points, which are my main point and will be expressed briefly, following what has gone before as necessary introduction.

The first is that, whatever the explanation for evil in the world, God is in it with us. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.* Jesus shares our pain. Jesus bears our pain. There is a point to praying. Relieving human need is synonymous with loving Jesus.

Secondly, whatever the explanation of evil, these situations create an opportunity for good. It is in the face of evil that we can show fortitude and exhibit generosity. As we said last week on Remembrance Sunday, war is one of the greatest evils perpetrated by human beings and yet it can bring out the very best in us in terms of courage, loyalty, endurance and even love. Maybe that is why there is evil in the world, to create an opening for love.

Thirdly those pictures of the devastation caused by the typhoon are a reminder of how fragile our earthly existence is. It can all be taken away in a moment of time. Indeed everything we have on earth inevitably will be taken from us. Then where will we stand? Where will we place our hope then? According to the Bible (II Peter 3¹⁰⁻¹⁴): *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall*

be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless. Where will we stand then?