

“Confusion About Confusion”
EpiphanyC-02 – January 17, 2010

Preaching Text: *“God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:3-4)”*

By now all of us have seen the shocking images coming out of Haiti in the aftermath of last week’s massive earthquake. The sweep of devastation is so profound it’s virtually impossible to conceive it, much less describe it. It’s simply beyond our frame of reference.

During our prayer group this past week, somebody made the sadly obvious point that in light of this tragedy, none of us really has anything at all to complain about.

For compounding the initial damage that alone caused tens of thousands of deaths, there is the threat of widespread civil unrest due to a lack of aid and governmental infrastructure, and also the threat of disease along with the absence of food and clean water. Those on the ground report mass confusion, even chaos.

In the aftermath of all such tragedies, inevitable questions arise. Among them is this: why would a good and loving God allow such innocent human suffering?

No doubt each of us has asked this question in the last few days. For if truth be told, not many sensitive to the true magnitude of this horror haven’t experienced at least some measure of resentment toward God. Bewildering tragedy necessarily invites spiritual complexity.

For the atheist, this is proof that God does not exist. And in the coming days their voice will be heard yet again. No systematic belief in a God of justice and mercy, we will be told, can possibly provide context and meaning to these horrific events.

Then again, the atheistic argument ignores the countless tragedies the Christian faith has endured throughout the ages, from the Black Death to the Holocaust, not to mention all the many natural disasters, earthquakes being but one.

All things being equal, perhaps the worst explanations for natural disasters come not from the atheists, but from Christians themselves.

Some of you may have heard the comments by Pat Robertson of *The 700 Club* fame. The Haitian earthquake, he announced on his TV show, was the price Haiti was paying for having made a pact with the Devil in exchange for its independence from France. This was a historic fact, he explained.

Immediately following the hellish Tsunami in South Asia in late December 2004, David B. Hart, best known for his most recent book, *The Atheist Delusions*, perhaps the most stinging rebuttal of the “new atheism,” wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* addressing the theological import of the disaster.

In the days following its publication, several Christian readers wrote in, posing divergent explanations for the Tsunami’s incalculable suffering. One reader argued that innocent suffering ultimately produces a greater good for our world.

Another argued that God maintains a kind of karmic scoreboard, that God’s sense of justice demands punishments and rewards be distributed according to one’s just desserts. If an “imbalance” arises, the reader suggested, God must even the score, even if it involves innocents to suffer.

Yet another reader felt such tragedies allow God’s divine attributes to be manifest in ways not otherwise possible.

In each case, what one sees is a strained attempt to find meaning in the seemingly monstrous randomness of nature’s violence, to find solace in God’s guiding hand.

Such ideas, says Hart, in a follow-up article, aside from making God sound more like the Devil than God, ignore something very basic about evil. For “there is no more liberating knowledge given us by the gospel,” he says, “and none in which we should find more comfort – than the knowledge that suffering and death, considered in themselves, have no ultimate meaning at all.”

For nowhere in these readers’ accounts is to be found “the Christian belief in an ancient alienation from God that has wounded creation in its uttermost depths,” that has caused this world to become a “shadowy remnant of the world God intends, and [that has] enslaved creation to spiritual and terrestrial powers hostile to God.”

Hart goes on to say that, as Christians, we must accept the idea that suffering and death is, in the final analysis, morally unintelligible. It doesn't make sense. It is not God's plan and it is not God's doing. And there is *nothing* good that *necessarily* comes out of it.

Christians, he goes on to say, often find it difficult to "adopt the spiritual idiom of the New Testament" which assumes that there is an ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil. By means of the cross, God has entered into the cosmos and "broken the boundaries of fallen nature asunder," to "refashion creation after its ancient beauty - wherein neither sin nor death had any place."

Evil, traditionally understood within Christianity, is, simply put, the absence or "privation" of the good. And it is our common experience of this same absence or privation, found in sin, suffering and death, that blinds us to God's true nature.

"I do not believe," writes Hart, "we Christians are obliged - or even allowed - to look upon the devastations visited upon the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to console ourselves with vacuous cant about the mysterious course taken by God's goodness in this world, or to assure others that some ultimate meaning or purpose resides in so much misery."

"Ours is, after all, a religion of salvation; our faith is in a God who has come to rescue His creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death, and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hate."

"For while Christ takes the suffering of his creatures up into his own," he continues, "it is not because he or they had need of suffering, but because he would not abandon his creatures to the grave. And while we know that the victory over evil and death has been won, we know also that it is a victory yet to come, and that creation, therefore, as Paul says, groans in expectation of the glory that will one day be revealed."

"Until then," he concludes, "the world remains a place of struggle between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death; and, in such a world, our portion is charity."

"As for comfort, when we seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child I do not see the

face of God, but the face of His enemy...Faith [in the final analysis] has set us free from optimism, and taught us hope instead.”

“[Rather] than showing us how the tears of a small girl suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, [God] will instead raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes - and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and [the one] who sits upon the throne will say, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” Amen.