

Sermon: 'Are Hurricanes God's Fault?'

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LESSON: Psalm 148

How many of you here this evening are fed up with the weather this summer?

Yes it's been raining day after day,
and if you are like me the weather affects my mood a bit,
I get up and look out of the window and it is raining or dull and it makes me
feel a bit dull as well.

Just this week the scientists have been telling us that the Arctic icecap has retreated
far more this summer than ever before,
this opens up the possibility of conflict as to who owns the oil there,
now more easily drilled.

It opens up a debate as to whether or not oil should be taken at all from such
a wild and important ecological area,
the now famous Governor Sarah Palin is all for it,
as of course are the oil companies,
however many environmentalists are appalled at the damage that might do.
But also because this melting means that the white snow and ice are not
there to reflect the sun's rays it opens up an even faster cycle of warming
of the sea and melting still more of the ice cap,
which, the meteorologists tell us,
will mean more extreme weather conditions across the world,
and might mean that the dull rain we look out on might become the
hurricane that others face up to.

Yes we do moan about the weather,
it is a British habit,
but although flooding such as that in Morpeth this last week causes
devastation to local communities that is not on anything like the scale of the
huge hurricanes that have been driving through on the other side of the Atlantic.

You may or may not know that each developing storm is given a name,
that they work through the alphabet doing that,
and that they go boy girl, boy girl,
thus at present the main threat is Hurricane Ike,
but before that the area has been hit time and again this season by major storms,
Hannah, Gustav, Fay and Edouard being some of the worst of them.

The present hurricane, Hurricane Ike,
has pounded Haiti, where there have been hundreds killed and complete devastation,
then it has moved on to Cuba and the Turks and Cacaos Islands,
and now it is now heading for Texas,
where over a thousand buses have evacuated people from the coastline
near Galveston.
and where the authorities remember Hurricane Dolly which came in July,
16 inches of rain fell then and damage of 1.2 Billion dollars was caused.

How do we understand hurricanes as Christians,
how do we understand earthquakes,
floods,
drought?
How do we understand communities devastated and lives lost as the result of
the work of God's creation,
what is our reaction to all this?
are hurricanes God's fault?

The atheist will shake her fist at the heavens and smash it to ground in the frustration
of living in such a malign seeming universe.
The agnostic will hastily put to the back of his mind any glimmer of direction
which he was beginning to find and go back to his bafflement
as to what life is all about.

And the Christian?

Well some on the lunatic fringe see all these cosmic events as a sign of the end times,
thus they welcome them because they believe they are a sign that
the Lord will soon return,
"These are the *times and seasons* the Bible talks about" they say,
and they are happy at what happens in spite of the horrific effect on their
fellow human beings who God presumably loves just as much as he loves them.
In my experience those holding these views are not easily swayed either by
logical or biblical argument,
I do not intend to spend time on countering their views because here in the
United Kingdom there are not many who hold to this viewpoint.

What though of the thinking Christian,
the woman or man who holds a very real and personal faith but who does not
switch off their brain in doing so?

I am sure many of you here tonight are in that category,
how do you and I make sense of the hurricane and the natural disaster?
How do we set what we see around us alongside our belief in a God of love?
the earthquake,
the hurricane,
the tsunami,
the drought,
the flood,
why, why, why?

Let us spend a while in stretching our minds a little by looking at some of the various explanations which are given.

The first argument we hear is that natural disaster isn't in fact the fault of God, but rather the fault of humankind. Thus the seemingly increasing number of hurricanes is the result of global warming caused by humankind's profligate use of creation.

The devastation caused by earthquakes is the result of the foolishness of building in areas known to be on fault lines in the earth,

for example there has already been one San Francisco earthquake which caused devastation but the city was rebuilt and the next earthquake will inevitably someday come because the whole city is set across the San Andreas fault in the crust of the earth.

Again another example is that there has been flooding in New Orleans because buildings should never have been put on such low lying ground in a storm surge area.

Now like most arguments there is some truth in it, but people did not ask to be born in a particular place at a particular time, hurricanes sweep across vast distances and whole communities and countries, are we to leave them uninhabited?

Tsunamis wipe out whole coastal areas,
is no-one ever to build or live on any coast?

If we press this logic to a conclusion and apply it personally it would mean that you and I would never switch on an electric plug in case we electrocuted ourselves, because some people do electrocute themselves.

We would never cross a road in case we were knocked over,
because some people are knocked over.

We would never swim in case we drowned,
because some people do drown.

To blame humankind for being in the wrong place when a disaster happens is a possible argument,
but it is not a reasonable one.

The second area to explore is the troubling question of God's omnipotence, to call God omnipotent is to claim that God can do anything, and also to realise that if in fact there was anything which God could not do God would not be God!

So why doesn't God simply divert the hurricane?

Why doesn't the earth crack where no-one is?

If there is a drought why doesn't God just send along a cloud or two?

And of course for the Christian we do not just believe in an omnipotent God but we also believe in a loving God,

thus the issue becomes still more pressing,

if God is a God of love why is God inactive in the face of such suffering?

To get to grips with this we need to understand that we live in a given world, a world of cause and effect,

a world which has been created with rules of nature which are constant and which therefore allow us to explore and know what is likely to happen in any given situation.

I wonder if you have ever thought what might be the effect of God intervening whenever someone was in trouble!

The theologian John Hick writes in his book "Evil and the God of Love" giving us a picture of what the world would be like if this happened.

"The effect would be as though each living creature were individually watched over by a miracle working guardian angel charged with protecting it from pain.

Fire, whose heat gives a vital warmth but also burns us if we put our hand in it, would suddenly lose its heat whenever it was about to cause pain.

Water, which has certain properties in virtue of which it can both sustain life by slaking our thirst and destroy life by suffocation,

would suddenly lose these properties whenever someone was in danger of drowning.

Knives, which can cut both bread and flesh,

would suddenly become blunt rather than cause a hurt.

Food, which is pleasant to taste but hard to digest,

and alcohol, which warms and cheers but which, in excess, makes drunken sots and dangerous drivers,

would cease to have any undesirable effects:

and no amount of tobacco would foster lung cancer.

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The density and hardness of things, which make it possible to walk and to build houses,

but also to be killed or injured by a flying stone or a wielded stick, would be continually adjusting for the avoidance of pain.

In short, life would not longer be carried on in a stable structured environment whose laws we must learn on penalty of pain or death,

but would approximate to a prolonged dream in which our experience arranges itself according to our own desires." **(pp341 & 342)**

In such a world as this we would not comprehend nature

nature would instead comprehend us;

there would be no evolutionary process for no part of creation would need to struggle;

there would be no laws of science because everything would be in a constant

state of change and flux and what we saw around us would be beyond rational study;

To sum up we would have a world with no challenges,

a world with no need to ever seek help from or offer help to our fellow human beings,

a world in which there would be no desire to develop because our easy and

adaptive world would meet our needs at every turn.

In such a world as this we could not live,

all we could do would be to exist!

It is because God is all powerful that he has made this world as it is,

and because God is all powerful that he has made humankind,

the likes of you and me,

as the highest point of His creation.

My friends, if we are to live as free human beings in a world where there are rules of nature and science and where we are free to accept responsibility for how we live and for how we respond to everything God has put around us.

We cannot expect God to intervene every time one of us is in trouble,
expect God to turn disaster and difficulty into an easy road rather like the Fairy Godmother in Cinderella!!

As human beings most of us live our lives in an ordered environment in which we are prepared to take responsibility for our lives,
we cannot expect God to intervene at every turn to stop the effect of any disaster.

So we have so far seen that disaster is not the fault of humankind,
nor is disaster going to be averted by the intervention of God,
a third idea put forward by some Christians
is that such events are within the active will of God,
that they are in some way a punishment from God.

Thus after the terrible Christmas Tsunami some Christians saw its catastrophic effect as being God trying to get the Muslim community in some of the devastated areas to be converted to Christianity,
that may seem to be an extraordinary viewpoint but it was fiercely and sincerely held,
largely by those on the other side of the Atlantic who had not been affected!

There is however a long historical precedent for this view,
the Jewish people saw everything as being within the will of God,
thus on a personal level if someone was sick it was because they or their parents had sinned,
and on a national level if there was a defeat or a disaster
it was because God was angry.

This idea is well illustrated in missionary history when some years ago there was a great earthquake in Guatemala which killed 23,000 people,
some of the locals were convinced that such an event must have come because God wanted to punish them,
the Christian missionaries latched onto this and preached it,
and many were indeed converted,
but the question I would want to ask here is what sort of God
were they converted to?

Is this the God shown to us by Jesus Christ?

The one who turns the other cheek,
the one who teaches us to forgive,
the one who goes to the cross for love of us?

That is the God the New Testament reveals to us,
a God who stands at the door and knocks and who surely would never
force faith through either punishment or the threat of punishment.

Then we move on the fourth view that is often taken,
that these events are signs of the end times,
that there will be great physical upheaval before Jesus comes again,
they are what Jesus was talking about in the gospels when he says,

Matthew 24 and verse 7

"There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. all these are the beginning of the birth pains."

The problem here is that there is a sense in which we are always in the end time, now is always the end time,
for each generation needs to get hold of the truth that the Jesus who came to the stable of Bethlehem will also one day come again and that it could be today, thus each generation tends to read into events its own signs of the end time, and in our television age disasters which would have had little impact upon us a hundred years ago come alive week by week in our living rooms. Jesus told us about these end times in His teaching and His parables, but Jesus also told us to live one day at a time, to live every day as if this might be the day of his return, there will always be those things happening in the universe which we might take to be signs of the times, but perhaps their significance is not in the events themselves but in the meaning we give to them, and in any case many of us would have real problems with the idea that God is going to kill thousands of other people in order to give the rest of us a warning of the return of Jesus.

So after all this I have to say that we are left with no easy answer to that question, "Are Hurricanes God's Fault?"
we are left struggling with that great question "Why?"
through science we have some insights as to why disasters happen, some insights as to where they are likely to happen, some ways of recording how they happen and learning from that, but we can make very little sense of the theological question as to how the catastrophic effect of the hurricane or the earthquake or the flood or the drought can be the creation of a loving God.

That means that sadly,
having posed the question,
I have no answers for you this evening,
it seems that God has arranged creation in a certain way and he will not interfere with the way in which it runs,
but I leave you with just a clue as to a way through,
and that is to remind you that God sent his only son Jesus to this world of hurricane, earthquake, flood and drought,
and when God sent Jesus to a stable he himself became vulnerable in just the same way as we are,
vulnerable to accident or force of nature.

The umbilical cord might well have become wrapped around his neck at birth;
Herod might have caught up with the Holy Family and killed Jesus just as he
killed all the other boys of that age.

The visit to the Temple when Mary and Joseph lost Jesus might have led to
kidnap or assault.

The slipping chisel in Joseph's carpenter's shop might have left a wound
which became infected and caused an early death.

Or perhaps even the crowd in the courtyard of the Temple might have shouted
"Crucify".

The Jewish leaders might have told lies at his trial.

The Procurator Pontius Pilate might have washed his hands of justice.

The Roman authorities might have taken Jesus and nailed him to a cross.

God was vulnerable in Christ,
and the only answer I have to the question "Why",
why hurricanes and why everything else which causes us pain,
is to say that I don't know why but I do know that God knows the pain,
God shares in the dilemma,
God suffers with all victims everywhere,
and there I must leave it,
pointing you only to a cross which shows us that somehow,
mysteriously,
God is in it all,
and pointing you also to an empty tomb which in some way.
equally mysteriously,
promises us hope in the face of it all.

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