

In the wake of loss and disaster such as we have seen on the Turkish/Syrian border this week, we struggle to understand how a God who is all-powerful and all-knowing can also be considered good and loving and for most of us, it is also hard to know how to pray. Today I am going to address the former in a short talk where we will find that the lectionary readings are very relevant and then lead us all in a longer time of prayer.

You might be asking “Why would God allow natural disasters?” We have to remember that the world is fallen. The Bible says that when man fell into sin, all of nature was cursed. In other words, it was impossible for a sinful man to live in a perfect environment of paradise, so all of nature is cursed.

But having said that, it doesn't mean that God has a hands-off policy when it comes to natural disasters. Many people want to protect God from the clear teaching of the Bible, which shows he is involved in natural disasters. It is not necessarily that God causes them, but the very fact that He could prevent them shows that we need to face squarely the fact that natural disasters happen under his auspices.

Let me give you a few examples. During the time of Noah, the flood obviously was sent by God. We read that God clearly sent the plagues in Egypt before the Exodus and then it categorically says in Jonah that God hurled a storm into the sea. We must see God in natural disasters. We also read that the Israelites suffered quite a few disasters where the main remedy was to come back to trusting God. The question, of course, is why does he allow them and what is there to be learned.

First of all, natural disasters show us the uncertainty of life. Thousands of people wake up in the morning not knowing what is going to happen that day especially those who live on tectonic fault lines. We can't get away from the reality that life is very, very short and it's possible for us to delude ourselves. Our first reading implies - no even states this fact. Paul says *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*. In other words, our life on earth, however it is, is nothing compared to the glory and the magnificence of God and how it will be when Jesus returns.

When we think about the second coming, there will be many different disasters preceding it but then the result will be beyond our imagination and will incomparably outweigh any suffering, either individually or corporately that we have endured.

One of the greatest challenges we have as Christians is to somehow continue to believe God and to trust Him in the midst of horrendous devastation. When you see children being separated from their fathers and mothers, when you see lives being torn and hundreds of people dead, it is very natural to ask the question, *Where is God?* We even see it in the Bible when mockers say, *“Where is this God of yours?”* (Psalm 42:10).

Jesus told His followers, *“Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). Jesus warned us life will be difficult but He would put it all right in the end. Until then, He offers His presence through all that life throws at us and he asks us to trust him, to seek his kingdom as we are more valuable than birds or flowers. He has already intervened for us on earth in the greatest way possible. It was Martin Luther who said, *“When you look around and wonder whether God cares, you must always hurry to the cross and you must see him there.”* Also, the last thing Jesus gave us before He returned to heaven was a promise. *“And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matt 28:20). Jesus wants to be there with you through the good and the bad.

Secondly, what we must also realise is that time is short and eternity is .. well, eternal. Sometimes we reverse that through the values that we have here on this earth. Although life is precious, the fact is that earthquakes do not increase death. Everybody is going to die someday. It's when and the way they die that causes us so much grief.

Back to the words from St Paul, he himself Turkish as he came from Tarsus, a town that would have felt the earthquake on Monday. Pete Greig, in his reflection on this passage, says that it is quite noisy... firstly creation is groaning, then it is us who groan and then the Spirit groans *“too deep for words”*. That is a lot of groaning - amongst us in creation, around us in the heavenly realms and also deep within our souls.

And we will groan in lament in a minute but actually, the groaning in this passage is not cries of despair but of new life - "*the pains of childbirth*". And this is more than a metaphor because it is the heart of the cross. We have been told that '*he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more for the former things have passed away...behold I am making all things new. (Rev 21)*'. This is our hope - why we trust in Jesus. There is a good ending - we just need to come under his reign every day, trust him and have faith, that though we cannot see the big picture, God is in control.