

God And The Tsunami

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The tsunami waves of December 26, 2004 was a shock for most people in the world. The evidence for this are the waves of generosity that it provoked all over the world, even among children, and the amount of money and gifts that came pouring in. The media that brings the extent of the damage to the small screen in every home within some minutes after the event is certainly one of the reasons. The damage indeed was extensive. Geographically it was spread from Indonesia to Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and East Africa. The damage to property was great. The loss of houses and instruments of livelihood like fishing boats and nets was unimaginable. But the most shocking was the loss of lives, with crowds of people simply washed away, especially women and children. The waves were so sudden, so strong and so deadly that few on its path could escape their fury. Earthquakes and tidal waves happen regularly. But the Tsunami of 2004 was lived globally as an unusual and enormous experience of disaster.

Questions

A disaster like this immediately gives rise to questions in the mind of believers. They concern what we call the problem of evil. If God is good why such a disaster with so much material destruction and loss of innocent lives? Why should such a fate strike me or people close to me? If some people lost their lives, say in Alaska or in Africa, we may not be much affected. But the Tsunami struck us at home, so to speak. So the questions become acute. Scientific explanations of what happened and why may be offered. But they cannot do away with the personal questions.

The Tsunami also brought out the good and the bad in the humans. People all over the world responded so generously that there is more money available than is really needed. But the same time, little of that money seems to reach the really affected. Much of it is eaten up by the middlemen of all descriptions. Selfishness, groupism and casteism have raised their ugly heads even among the people who have suffered at the hands of the Tsunami. People have also shown how the survival instinct eventually takes the upper hand. People who narrowly escaped the Tsunami are deeply struck by their escape and thank God for it. They think less about those who had lost their lives. They look rather to their future. The children may be orphaned, but their will to live is strong. The destruction was great at the pilgrim shrine of Our Lady of Health at Vailanganni. Many wondered whether pilgrims will continue to come. Three months after the disaster, at the end of March, during the Holy Week, the shrine was as crowded as usual. All this shows that, whatever be the suffering, the people seem to take it in their stride. Life continues. Except for the people on the coast line who are still homeless and jobless, the Tsunami is a memory. Big Tsunamis like this may happen once in a hundred years. But minor disasters of a similar nature happen constantly. Therefore questions of meaning remain – at least for the theologians. Questions provoke reflection, even if they may never be adequately answered. An attempt to understand may help us to face future disasters with more understanding and equanimity.

Presuppositions

Questions are never innocent and straight forward as they may seem to appear. They are based on presuppositions which may be conscious or unconscious. They are often taken for granted and so remain unquestioned. A prudent way of answering questions is to look at the presuppositions before starting to look at the questions themselves. Once the presuppositions are unearthed, if they are not obvious or proper, the questions themselves may disappear. Let us therefore look at some of the presuppositions to start with.

One common presupposition is that the humans are born to have a happy life, with all their needs and desires fulfilled. They would normally live long. The length of life would depend on local conditions of life-expectancy. They would not get too ill and have a peaceful death after having lived a full life. Any event that goes against this expectation is considered not only unfortunate, but unjust. The person is not having his/her due. So the death of a young person, death due to illness or accident, death caused by natural catastrophes like earthquakes and tsunamis are seen as unusual, needing an explanation. Similarly, suffering of any kind, illness, physical deformities, financial loss, etc. also raise questions. Such expectations regarding human life are in turn based on the supposition that God the Creator is good and a good God cannot permit any kind of suffering or misfortune in the world. One often hears the argument. If people, especially innocent people suffer, then either God is not good or God is not powerful. If God were good he would not let innocent people suffer. If the innocent people still suffer, then maybe God is not powerful enough to block the suffering inflicted on the innocent. Another presupposition closely linked to these is that if people do suffer then they are not innocent, though they may not be aware of their guilt. God is just and God cannot inflict suffering on the innocent. This is reason that Job's friends sought to convince Job that he must have transgressed God's commands, perhaps unconsciously, to deserve the sufferings that he was undergoing. There is another presupposition here: suffering is a punishment for wrongdoing. The theory of karma and of purgatory, not to speak of hell, is based on this presupposition. Not only is suffering is a punishment for sin, but also sin cannot go unpunished. Justice demands that sin is expiated in some way, by some one, if not by the sinner himself. It is in this context that we say Jesus Christ suffered and died for our sins. Some one has to. Otherwise we would not be saved. A final presupposition is that suffering must have some agency. Suffering never happens just like that. If we do not feel responsible for it because of our own guilt, we seek to attribute it to the

'evil eye' or to sorcery. Tackling the evil may therefore involve tackling the evil-doer.

I have listed a lot of presuppositions in the previous paragraph. As long as these presuppositions are lurking in our minds it is fruitless to discuss the problem of evil. These presuppositions have to be examined and tested first. Let us consider them one by one.

The Universe

We seem to take for granted that God has or should have created a perfect universe, in which everything is okay. It will be a perfect machine in which every part is working well. The humans will be like robots or automatons fulfilling their predetermined functions like clockwork. There are no hitches, no break downs. God is all good and powerful. So God has created a model universe. Malfunctioning or evil in this universe is unthinkable. If there is something out of place in this universe that causes friction, it must have been put there by some one opposed to God, the devil or the evil one. If God is really good and all powerful, this could not happen. So what has gone wrong then?

The fact is that God has not created this kind of universe. The universe is an evolving reality. Cosmologists speak of a big bang which scatters pieces of the universe as suns, stars and planets. The earth has cooled down. Its parts are still moving. Mountains may come up and disappear. The ice cover may be advancing or receding. The readjustments of parts in a revolving universe causes earthquakes. The humans too are the result of a process of evolution, though such evolution is not independent of God. In this process of evolution malformations can occur. Diseases may emerge. Some may die early and some may live long. The humans have to eke out a living in what seems sometimes to be a hostile universe. This is the world that God has created. God could have created other different types of universes. But we are living in this

one. It is not for us to ask God why God has created this universe. God makes this very clear to Job. A clock-like universe would have been uninteresting. An evolving universe makes possible creativity and change. Anyway this is the universe that God has made. Accidents and catastrophes, earthquakes, floods and drought are the life of this universe. So are the mountains and lakes, the multi-coloured flowers and fruits, the flowing streams and the billowing clouds and the process of evolution itself which has brought the humans to the stage where they are today. If houses and fields get destroyed and people die, these too are part of this evolving universe. We have to take it as it is and see how we can be creative within the conditions that it imposes. The story of creation in the Bible repeats at the end of every stage of creation that God saw it and it was good.

Suffering

In this universe of ours pain is part of creation. In the cycle of life, death gives rise to new life. Unless the seed falls into the earth and dies, it remains barren. If it dies it produces fruit. The child is born out of the mother's pain. Pain, death and life constitute the process of creation. In this process if we look only at the pain it will not be intelligible. We have to look at the process as a whole. Usually when we are caught up in suffering we look only at the suffering. We may not even be able to look at its consequences. The whole picture is not available to us. It remains a mystery, an object of hope and expectation. So the feeling of pain predominates at the moment.

Not all pain and suffering in the universe is natural. Some suffering is imposed on some people by others. Such are wars and persecutions. Some of this pain could be avoided. While we are helpless in the face of natural catastrophes we can resist suffering imposed by the humans. But we hope that even avoidable, human-made suffering serves a higher purpose in ways unknown to us, but known to God. It is here that there is an element of mystery.

We must be warned however about pointing to others as the cause of suffering. This is another way of not accepting that suffering can be a part of the natural process. When suffering is perceived as undeserved because one has done no wrong to deserve it then one seeks to attribute to the ill will of some one. It may be the anger of some deity, the influence of the unfulfilled spirit of a person who had died an untimely death or the manipulations of a sorcerer, however the technology of sorcery may be explained. One's attention then is diverted from the suffering to the one who has caused the suffering. Attempts then are made to control through ritual and other means the one to whose machinations the sufferings are attributed. Similar efforts at evading the real issue would be to say that Tsunami is the result of atomic explosions or the warming of the earth. Some people would seek to put the blame on the Americans and others for not warning the would be sufferers quickly enough. Racialist motives have been attributed to this neglect.

Suffering whether natural or human made can be encountered, not passively as objects, but actively. One can try to avoid or escape suffering. One can accept suffering as an inevitable part of reality. One can welcome suffering as a means in a struggle. One can willingly embrace suffering as part of a creative process. This means that we need not be slaves of suffering. We can be its masters.

Sufferings and God

God can not only tolerate, but even impose suffering as part of the evolving universe and as an element of a creative process. But God never imposes suffering on people as punishment for sin. The God that Jesus manifested to us in his deeds and words is a loving Father-Mother, who is ready to forgive and love. We know the story of the prodigal son. He goes off with his half of the property and squanders it in riotous living. When he repents and comes back, the father does not even wait for his excuses, but welcomes him, embraces him and orders a feast. God

is like the good shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep and goes after the lost one. Jesus rejects the idea of suffering as punishment for sin. Jesus and his disciples encounter a man born blind. The disciples ask Jesus whose sin is responsible for the man's blindness, his own or his parents. Jesus denies the link and says that the man has been born blind so that the glory of God may be manifested. The blind man becomes an occasion for the proclamation of God's goodness and healing love manifested in the Messiah.

The Cross

Jesus on the cross is a concrete manifestation of some of the ideas that I have been proposing above. Jesus' sufferings are certainly not a punishment, neither for his sins, nor for the sins of the others. They were imposed on him by the leaders of the Jews in their anxiety to protect their own authority against the challenges that Jesus was making by his liberative teaching. The suffering is indeed painful and Jesus seeks to escape it if possible. He prays to God "to take the chalice away from him". But he realizes that it is part of his mission and so he accepts it willingly, if not gladly. He makes it a opportunity to empty himself totally to do the will of the Father. He makes it a symbol of his self-giving love of the others. For some it is a model of love; for others it is a challenge; for all it is call to conversion. He breaks the cycle of retaliatory violence – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – by renouncing retaliation. It becomes a lesson in non-violent love for the whole of humanity. Love overcomes death. But this victory comes only with the resurrection. The acceptance of suffering therefore supposes this hope in the resurrection. Suffering, like death, has no meaning in itself. Death is meaningful only as a way to new life. Just as there is no resurrection without death, there is no death without resurrection either. The relation of death/suffering to life is not however automatic. Life is not merited by death. It is God who gives life. God does not give it as a kind of reward. He responds in love to the love shown by the person who is offering himself in death.

Jesus' paschal mystery of death and resurrection has also shown us the dimension of solidarity. Solidarity does not mean that one can suffer for others, certainly not instead of others. But one can suffer with others and participate in the movement through death to new life. Jesus did not suffer instead of us. He suffered with us. He leads us with him to new life.

Solidarity

This sense of solidarity can also explain some types of suffering. Our thinking today tends to be individualistic. We think of each person as an individual, how s/he lives and how s/he achieves his/her salvation. But life is not individualistic. We are born into family. We grow up in a cultural group. We depend on nature and on others at every moment. We are called to love each other and build community. Our destinies are inter-linked. The vision of our future is not a collection of individuals like monads, but of a communion in which all are gathered together (cf. Eph 1:10), reconciled with each other (cf. Col 1:20). This communion includes not only the cosmos (cf. Rom 8:19-21), but also God. As Jesus prays: "That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." (Jan 17:21) Once we get rid of the idea that salvation is something merited by our individual efforts and agree that it is a gift of God that is measured by God's generosity than by our efforts, then we can imagine that every one whether they die young or old share in the same communion of blessedness, which is God's gift to all of us as a community.

The context of solidarity can also help us to understand, not only the otherworldly fruits of suffering, but also its this worldly impact. How does our suffering affect us and what impact has it on others? For ourselves, suffering is always a disciplining and learning process. Inflicting suffering on oneself is one of the ascetic ways through which we can control our inordinate desires and hates. It can take the form of

fasting and other penances. Sufferings can be welcomed as opportunities to discipline oneself. They can help us to empty ourselves so that we can be filled with God. We learn to depend less on ourselves, others and the world and surrender ourselves to God. They provoke us to think of the essential things of life and not worry about the transient phenomena of the world. We are taught to relativize the world. Such a detachment can bring us deep inner peace even in the midst of suffering. This was the insight and lesson of the Buddha.

Sufferings also offer an opportunity to others to express their solidarity and love. This was seen, for instance, in the spontaneous outpouring of compassion and charity all over the world for the victims. This can take the form, not only of material gifts, but of being near the suffering victims, consoling them, supporting them, helping them to reconstruct their lives in various ways. In relating to the others the victims get a sense of self respect and identity.

Unveiling our Hypocrisies

A little reflection on the Tsunami event will show us what kind of hypocrites we are. The whole world was shocked at the death and destruction wrought by the Tsunami waves. Many countries were concerned for their citizens caught up in the waves. Such a spirit of human solidarity and compassion is welcome. But the same mass media bring into our home pictures of the dead in human made wars every day of the year. Perhaps over a year the number of such dead may exceed those who died in the Tsunami. These deaths too leave behind orphans and widows and helpless old people. But various ideological factors like religious and cultural fundamentalism, racism, economic selfishness and the desire for political domination help us to fuel our hatred and justify these killings. Whole countries grow rich through the arms industry. Nature itself is exploited and destroyed without worrying about its consequences for the poor and future generations. Abortions kill millions

of children every year. Drugs ruin the lives of thousands. Globalization is making the rich richer and the poor poorer. The poor continent of Africa is being destroyed by AIDS and proxy wars. But people are not moved to compassion by these events. They are immune to these images in the media. People who are ready to blame God for the Tsunami, will not say anything about politicians who perpetuate unjust wars.

The Real Evil

The real evil in this situation is not the Tsunami waves. They did cause destruction. But there has been enough aid from across the world to make up for it and to start life again. But the real evil is the selfishness that has shown itself in so many ways in all directions. The so called NGOs and government agencies grow rich with the aid money that they receive. They fatten their pockets. Some one in the field calculates that only about 40% of the aid reaches the poor. The politicians are more interested in their own party members than the people who need their help. The affected people themselves try to make use of this occasion to make some money, receiving help under fictitious names, or cornering the aid that should go to all the poor. The fisherpeople refuse to allow the Dalits who were equally affected by the Tsunami to share in the relief provided. Fortunately, there are also many good people and agencies who have helped the orphans and the poor in various ways.

The Dead and the Living

In disasters like the Tsunami there are three sorts of people. There are the dead. We do not know how they feel. We may be sad for the young people who have died. Perhaps they are happy now with God and they may not mind having died early in life. Then there are the living who have lost near and dear ones and also house and property. The pain of loss and separation will be there. But they need not grieve for the dead. They would be grateful to the people who are making up for their loss. They will have to come to terms with their own sense of shock. It will be

easier if they accept that we are living in an evolving universe and such disasters have to be expected occasionally. They need not curse God, but accept reality and face it without getting lost in baseless presuppositions about God, life and the world. The loss of a dear one to the Tsunami waves may be less of a shock than seeing one's parents or children or brothers and sisters and companions raped or butchered before one's eyes by soldiers of an oppressive army. The third group of people are the onlookers. They are moved by sympathy. Some help. Others profit by the circumstance to enrich themselves.

Conclusion

Our reflections in the preceding pages have shown that the presuppositions on which our questioning is based are untenable. There is a different way of looking at the phenomena and their underlying realities. We no longer see it as a problem but as a mystery that is beyond our understanding. There is sense of hope that helps us to live with the mystery. The hope is sustained by the death and the resurrection of Jesus. We realize that the mysteries of this world can be understood only with reference to another world. This makes us humble and dependent. We accept the world, not fatalistically, but with the determination to recreate it within the parameters set by God. Phenomena like the Tsunami waves make us give up our pretensions to control and dominate the universe. We learn to live in harmony with nature – and with God.