

The Indian Ocean Disaster. Sermon 2nd January 2005

At the centre of our prayers today are those who have suffered and died in the Indian Ocean disaster. We pray also for those who are supervising and taking part in the relief operations. We give thanks for their bravery and generosity of spirit; their hard work and perseverance in appalling conditions. The relentless news coverage – and it has been relentless – provides harrowing descriptions and images. So the actuality – not what's in the papers and on television – must be literally atrocious. Some from the scene of the disaster have confessed that they had to break from their rescue work because the scene of suffering and death was too much to bear. And so we pray for them, thanking God for them and asking for them to be given renewed strength and courage.

One of the great insights of modern historical study is that the way we record an event tells us as much about those who do the reporting – *us* – as about the event itself. Indeed what, behind all the reports *is* the true nature of the event itself? As Schopenhauer said, *The perceptions of an animal being killed are, we may suppose, quite different from those of the animal who is doing the killing.* So the uncomfortable fact is that all we shall ever know – all we *can* know – about the disaster in the Indian Ocean is what is mediated to us by...well, by the media, how else? We have now received a whole week's uninterrupted barrage of information about this catastrophe. What do we learn from it? What does it teach us about ourselves?

Some of what I shall now say will be unpalatable. First, the media coverage tells us that we seem to have an insatiable appetite for harrowing words and pictures. If it were not so, the mass media would not keep delivering its exquisite photographs of the dying and the dead. This in itself – our appetite for the sensation of suffering – that is suffering observed, not suffering endured – this ought to make us reflect on what sort of people we are. Is there an element of the voyeur here? Is this what the mass media are feeding? For be assured, if we revolted against these images, they would stop feeding us with them.

Well, I was disturbed and ashamed by something I discovered on the Internet. I wanted to see what the local newspapers in Indonesia and India were saying about the disaster and I came upon a full page article on the front of that renowned and respected newspaper *The Indian Times* – which in Imperial days was known as *The Times of India* of course. The editor of that paper was angry and bitter. He asked the question in banner headlines WHEN WILL THE BBC STOP THIS CORPSE SHOW? He was complaining about the rows upon rows of dead bodies filling western television screens every hour. And he objected because, as he said, restraint on portraying the dying and the dead *was* shown after the attacks on the twin towers on 11th September 2001. Why could not the same restraint be shown now?

The lurid and sensational portrayal of distressing events is insensitive to the relatives of the victims. The graphic display and redisplay of heartbreak and grief demeans, undermines and trivialises the suffering of those involved. You will hear this terrible disaster glibly referred to by those who know no better – that is the broadcasters and newspaper men - as a *tragedy*. It is not a tragedy. A tragedy is a literary term for a drama involving a great man or a great woman brought low by some personal flaw or lack of character: ambition, say in Caesar; or indecision in Hamlet.

So the suffering and death in the Indian Ocean is not a tragedy, but a disaster or a catastrophe. We can learn from the idea of a tragedy nonetheless. The ancient Greeks were the masters of tragedy. You have only to think of the great trilogy of Sophocles. And the Greek tragedy was bloody and brutal; horrific in the extreme; men having their eyes put out. But they had a way of dealing with the distressingly horrific aspects. They had them happen off stage – literally *obscene*; and that is where we get the meaning of that word.

In other words, there was no denial of the brutal reality, but it was delivered with restraint, with tact and sensitivity – so that it could be assimilated, meditated upon and prayed about.

Our civilisation knows nothing of tact, restraint and sensitivity. We are driven by two modes of destructive explicitness. The first is psychoanalysis and its foul influence on the art, literature and cinema of the last hundred years. And the false doctrine of psychoanalysis is that none of our thoughts and feelings should ever be repressed. Actually, there is much in us which we *must* repress if we are to save our civilisation and our souls. And the second mode of destructive explicitness is television. The foul result of television is simply that if something – however awful – *can* be shown, then you can bet your life it *will* be shown. Nothing, in the Greek sense, is obscene any longer. Nothing is taboo. And now also nothing is sacred. Every human emotion and act can and is portrayed for everybody's perusal. What we have in fact is abject suffering as documentary and catastrophe as entertainment. Agony and death among the advertisements for holiday destinations and sitting room furniture.

Well, what of the spiritual significance of all this? Many in the newspapers and on radio and television have been blaming God for the disaster. I read an article by one prominent woman journalist who said that, after the tsunami she could no longer bring herself to attend Mass. Another writer said the events of this last week had turned him into an atheist. If it were not so pathetic – and if the circumstances were not so terrible – you could laugh. Is it only *this* event which has destroyed their faith? It's a bit late in the day. I mean, they went on believing despite knowing about the Black Death, the Lisbon earthquake and the flu epidemic of 1919 which killed 50 million! Why in other words hadn't they stopped being believers ages ago?

For we are always threatened by natural disasters. Nothing has happened in the Indian Ocean that has not happened – or similar - in a score of other places time and time again. To blame God is the last gesture of a bankrupt intellect and worse, a failure of humility. Who do they think they are, these who blame God? Who do they make themselves out to be?

Humankind is a newcomer in an incredibly vast and ancient universe. And we understand our bit of it only. We understand our bit of it as the snail understands his bit of the garden. Who are we to search the infinite purposes of God? Ezra Pound gave some advice to modern man: *Pull down thy vanity!* We have been doing science in the modern sense for the small matter of 400 years. And we think to be able to comprehend the why and the wherefores of the universe and its meaning! *Pull down thy vanity!*

Regrettably modern secular man, modern media man, has been taught by Alexander Pope to think he is the measure of all things. By the great egocentric and purveyor of delusions Descartes to say “*I think, therefore I am*”. How very French! We have been encouraged by the philosophers of the so called Enlightenment to think of ourselves as the centre of attention. We have been corrupted by Sigmund Freud and depraved by trashy consumerism to indulge ourselves by all available means. None of these influences will do us any good. They will fail us even in the best of times and when times are bad they will return to mock us.

We need to come back to where true comfort is to be found. And it is found next to true knowledge and true wisdom – in the Bible, in the voice of God. Listen...

Job complained to God about the hard time he was having and why did God let him suffer so...and what, incidentally, God, do you think you're doing? This is what happened:

And the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man: for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me...

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth....?

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb...and said hitherto shalt thou come but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed...

And again he said, *be still and know that I am God. Amen*