

ON A JOURNEY: Meditations on God in Daily Life

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Tsunami

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Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42.1)

By Tom Ehrich

It was strange being in London when the Southeast Asian tsunami went from one more calamity in a year of calamities to a tragedy that galvanized many nations into charitable action.

I was away from my normal channels of information: newspapers at breakfast, internet media throughout the day, National Public Radio while driving. Even when I started getting information, I lacked sufficient context and meaning.

By context I mean an intellectual and emotional framework for sifting through the information overload. I can understand why American visitors to Germany during the 1930s failed to grasp the enormity of what was taking place, whereas European Jews saw the signs clearly and felt the danger. Being cut off from my normal context, I was initially surprised when Londoners went profoundly silent on New Year's Eve as a token of their concern. Then I remembered these were former colonies, the kin of neighbors, parts of an extended family that the British seem to identify.

By meaning I mean going deeply to the heart of an event, seeing not only the suffering – for newspapers showed no end of suffering in 2004, from earthquakes to genocide – but making some connection to it, some identification, as if the event had suddenly revealed common ground. Natural disasters remind us that we are all at the mercy of nature, just a few feet of ocean level from seeing downtowns flood, just a few degrees from being in the path of a hurricane or earthquake. Human-made disasters, by contrast, take us to common ground that we rarely want to see, namely, the inhumanity of humanity, our addiction to power, our lust for wealth, our penchant for cruelty.

We all respond to events differently. We process information differently, see different contexts and grasp different meanings. I have received e-mails from readers who found it difficult to preach on Sunday, who can barely sleep, whose world feels

imperiled, whose hearts are breaking, as well as e-mails from people who notice and care in different ways. On Victoria Embankment, Londoners observed silence on New Year's Eve, then exploded in enthusiasm for fireworks. At St. Paul's Cathedral, people prayed, gave generously, listened attentively, and then went on to supper and savoring a warm day. Others, I'm sure, stayed home on Friday, because fireworks now seemed absurd, or they stayed behind in a side chapel at St. Paul's to continue on in prayer.

My own response was to lose all remaining patience with those who tear our churches apart with little wars over doctrine, practice and preference, who try to make their worlds safer by hurting someone else. The enormity of this disaster made unmistakable the trivialities that hold many believers captive.

The prophet Isaiah saw the nation Israel, not as an end in itself, but as a "servant" whom God had called to "bring forth justice" to all nations. Not true religion, but justice. Not "Biblical truth" but justice. Not perfect morality, but justice. Not any doctrine or code or membership rights, but justice. And that justice was more than being nice, it was being a "light to the nations" serving the victim, freeing prisoners, instilling hope.

It could be that the tsunami disaster has enabled many to taste that radical call to servanthood, and that is why it proves so galvanizing. It enables us to be who we truly are, not that distortion of life which hides behind national identity and walls of privilege, but that true life to which God called us, a life that sees suffering and responds to it.