

Reflections on the tsunami

I spent New Year's Eve in Chennai, a city of 8 million where perhaps 200 were swept away by the tsunami. Like all of us, this terrible event shook me. The scale of human suffering, the raw power of nature, the lack of warning.... I was shaken as somebody born in India, as a Christian believing in a loving Sovereign God, and as an environmentalist, who spends his time talking about how wonderful nature is.

At one level, the tsunami was an entirely natural disaster. A basic understanding of plate tectonics tells us that massive undersea earthquakes sporadically occur, causing massive tsunamis. Nobody should claim this was part of the steady, less dramatic, but long-term far more lethal, human-induced climate-change caused by greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet there are environmental lessons to be learned. In some places the death-toll would have been lessened had we not destroyed nature's shock-absorbers, the complex system of mangrove swamps that absorb much of the impact of tropical storms and ocean surges.

In a deeper way, the tsunami has served as a painful reminder of our fragility, our interconnectedness with and dependence upon nature. Western civilization has tamed and conquered the natural world – sometimes backed by misguided Christians, confusing 'dominion' (Genesis 1:28) with 'domination'. 'Dominion' actually means Lordship, imaging the Servant King in caring for creation in a godly way.

In many places stories have surfaced of those who seemed to know the tsunami was coming: at Point Calimere, near Nagapattinam where 4,500 died, flocks of wintering water-birds disappeared before the tsunami, puzzling scientists. In Thailand and Sri Lanka, some animals forced their owners to take them to higher ground. On the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, there were fears for remote tribes on low-lying islands, as well as many species of endemic wildlife, but in most cases they survived, pre-warned by instinct or ancestral wisdom.

Have most of us somehow lost the art of listening to nature? Have we forgotten that nature is not something we can completely tame or control, but rather something of which we are a very small part. 'What are human beings, that you think of them?', asked the Psalmist, awed at nature's vast power, and even more awed at the nature of the Creator behind it.

Nobel Peace Prize winner, Professor Eric Chivian, in delivering the 2004 Darwin Lecture, said: 'This lack of connection to the environment, this fundamental failure to understand that our health and lives depend on the health of the natural world, is, in my view, the most important problem we face in the years ahead.'

Archbishop Rowan Williams, writing in the Daily Telegraph admitted the tsunami's challenge to faith but claimed (and this was my experience in India, talking to those who feared the loss of their whole families) that those who are closest to disaster often 'spend least energy raging over the lack of explanation'. It's not just that time to reflect is a luxury, but that meaning is often found by throwing yourself wholeheartedly into doing what you can to help. Job's 'comforters' only confuse and annoy him – it is, significantly,

when he loses himself in the massive complexity and mystery of wild nature that he begins to see God's pattern and purpose.

At a wider level, as we take our 'whys' to God, we can see the tsunami as part of what Paul in Romans 8 calls 'creation's groaning'. The universe is infected with the cancer of sin, groaning with the pain of dislocation and distress – from the shifting of tectonic plates to the bites of malarial mosquitoes. And if the fall has this ecological dimension, so too does the redemption Christ brings. Creation groans not only in despair, but also in hope, longing for the birthing of a new reality where Christ will be at heart of all things.

Dave Bookless, 5 February 2005

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