

# Shaken

**O**ur world has been shaken. On December 26 last year planet earth shrugged its great shoulders for one brief moment and set off an earthquake deep in the sea close to the island of Sumatra. A collision of tectonic plates produced a huge tidal wave that spread out and engulfed many seaside communities from Aceh to Somalia. Scientists say that the earth is still wobbling, and it will keep on vibrating for a while yet from the impact of that collision. But that will soon be over. For the present the plates have stopped crashing against each other, the sea has settled down, and the earth will soon stop shivering.

But the shock waves of that tsunami will not end so quickly. Our world has been shaken up far more profoundly than that. Whole communities have been devastated by that tidal wave. Up to 300,000 people, and may be even more, have lost their lives. Families have been torn apart permanently. Societies have lost their entire physical and economic infrastructure. The political order has been changed from the Maldives to Aceh. It will cost billions of dollars and take years of hard work before the social damage of this natural disaster is undone. None of those who have been touched by it will forget it as long as they live.

Yet the impact of that upheaval has spread even further than those communities and gone far deeper than the actual physical and social damage on them. It has hit us here in Australia and shaken us up mentally and spiritually. It has unsettled our view of the world and our place in it. Unlike the tsunami itself, the impact of that aftershock is likely to increase as time passes and its implications begin to register with us.

This natural disaster comes in the wake of two other political events that have already shaken us up. The first was the terrorist attacks on the symbolic heart of the western world on September 11, 2001. On top of that, and closer to home, has come the terrorist attacks in Bali, that symbolic paradise for fun-loving Australians. Both these atrocities have shaken up our understanding of the world and our sense of security in it. Both are, in some way, iconic events that seem to mark the end of an era and usher in a new state of affairs for us.

Despite their iconic significance, these two events differ radically from the tsunami. They are human events that dramatise human evil. Historically

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speaking, they are minor atrocities that come after a century of far greater human atrocities. Unlike them, the tsunami is a natural event that was not carried out by human hands. And that, I think, is why it has shaken us up so severely. Its impact on us is similar to the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that contradicted the teaching of the Enlightenment about the benevolence of the natural world and its conviction that its adherents lived in the best of all possible worlds.

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differently. I would like to explore why this is so and what this may mean for those of us who are Christians.

## The spiritual aftershock of the tsunami

Australians are, I think, much more religious than is commonly acknowledged. Their national religion is a simple kind of hedonistic pantheism. They serve a nameless 'god' who provides this sunburnt land for our enjoyment, a deity whose spirit is manifest in the natural world. Some even regard the earth itself as divine, though only a few would go as far as to speak of it as a goddess, Gaia. This belief in the goodness of the natural world has been reinforced in recent times by the discovery of the intricate order of the biosphere and our growing awareness of the damage that we humans have done to it. The spirit of this 'god,' its life-giving power, is evident in the beauty and harmony of nature. People experience that superhuman wholesome power by living in harmony with their natural habitat. In this view humans are the only source of evil. Their disruption of the ecological balance threatens to unleash an ecocatastrophe upon the face of planet earth.

Aspects of this spirituality have been embraced by some Christians. They see God largely as the creator whose glory is revealed in the natural world. For them Christ is the cosmic ruler who works together with the human family on an ecological rescue mission to restore the natural health of our planet. The traditional Christian teaching of the last things is therefore sidelined, because the world is held to be co-eternal with God. There is no original act of creation, no fall into sin,

and no end of the world, only its ongoing natural and spiritual evolution. The natural world is the main arena for the activity of God.

The tsunami has shaken up this popular spirituality in its various guises and has shown up the element of idolatry in it. Nature is not divine, nor even a manifestation of divinity. It is not as orderly and hospitable to us as we would like to believe. If we look for the face of God in the natural world we will not merely glimpse its benevolence but also its apparent malevolence, or, what is even worse, its indifference to us. We are, in fact, far more likely to hear its lament at the burden of decay that afflicts it since the fall of humanity (Rom 8:20,21) than its song of praise to its divine creator (Ps 148). In it we see both order and chaos. Things are not as they should be. The shadow of death rests upon it as on humanity.

For those who have eyes to see the tsunami is a sign that this world is dying a slow natural death. It is neither eternal nor divine. Like us it will pass away. Christ himself teaches us to see earthquakes as evidence that this world is coming to an end as well as the birth pangs of God's new creation (Matt 24:7,8). They do not foreshadow a final ecocatastrophe, but the shaking up of all created things to make way for God's establishment of an eternal 'world' that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:26,27), his creation of a new heavens and earth where righteousness is at home (2 Pet 3:13).

## The moral aftershock of the tsunami

A survey of students in one of our Lutheran colleges showed that many of them believed in karma. The law of karma teaches that acts have inevitable consequences. You get your own back. By your behaviour you forge your own destiny. If you do good you will prosper; if you do evil you will suffer.

This simple philosophy is often given a Christian or Muslim twist by putting God in charge of this system of reward and punishment. God evokes disaster for the purpose of punishing evildoers for what they have done. Disasters are acts of God meant to call sinners to repentance.

Some theologians have used this teaching to make religious sense of the tsunami. Thus some Muslims have claimed that this is an act of Allah to punish Muslims for their moral laxity and Buddhists for their persistent idolatry. Some Christians also maintain that it is God's judgment on Muslims for their rejection of Christ and persecution of Christians. Both parties assume that those who were hit by this disaster were worse evildoers than those who escaped its devastation.

Yet this does not ring true for us. We are quite rightly uneasy about the notion that these people were worse than we are. And that shakes up our moral certainties. It makes us reflect deeply about what we deserve and how God is involved in our lives. Why did this happen to those poor people? Why were we greedy Australians spared? Are we really better than they are? Do we deserve the prosperity that we enjoy? Are we safe because we are Christians, or because we have so many Christians in this land? When will

God throw the book at us?

The only answer that makes any sense to me is given by Jesus in Luke 13:1-9. On that occasion the disciples asked him to help them make sense of Pilate's slaughter of some pious pilgrims from Galilee as they were presenting their offerings to God at the temple. Where was God in this? In his response Jesus recalled another notorious disaster, the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem that led to the death of eighteen people. He asked whether they reckoned that this had

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happened because these people were so bad. He repudiated that conclusion and said: 'No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

Now that word hits us all where it hurts most. We can't divide people into two groups – those who are good like us, and the others who are far worse than us. Morally speaking, we are all in the same boat. We have all fallen out with God. We should all by rights get the chop. The only reason why we enjoy prosperity, and evil does not prevail, is because God is patient and kind and merciful to all of us. If that is so, then that tsunami is a call for us to repent of

our delusions of moral superiority and to rely on God's goodness in everything. It is a call for us Christians to bear the fruits of faith by acknowledging our solidarity with the whole fallen human family, praying for God's mercy on them, and sharing what we have with those in need. It is a challenge for us to take our prosperity as an undeserved gift from our gracious God rather than as evidence of our superior status.

## The theological aftershock

Even if they are religious, most modern and post-modern people are infatuated with power. They hold that the world's problems can be best solved by the right use of power. And that's why they have so much trouble making sense of the Triune God. That's why the Christian faith is so alien to them. Perhaps, that too is why they have been so shaken by the tsunami. It seems to contradict their most cherished beliefs about God and his way of working in the world. Why, they ask, did God, if he is almighty and good, not stop this disaster from happening? Why does he not use the immense physical and spiritual power at his disposal to prevent evil and stamp it out once and for all?

The tsunami demolishes this view of God and paves the way for a far more profound and wonderful vision of God, the God of the Old and New Testament. This loving, self-giving God seems to us to be so weak, because he sets out to redeem the world by his suffering, rather than by the use of his power to perform miracles. This God gave us the freedom to hurt him by rejecting him and his love. This God does not wipe out evildoers but continues to care for them. This God does not stamp out evil

but, instead, as is shown by the execution of his Son, brings good out of evil. This God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who joins us in our troubles and suffers the sin of the world, so that he can share all that he has with us. By the death of his Son he gives life to a dying world. That death was marked by an earthquake, because it shook up the old world in order to usher in a new world where the gracious presence of God is most evident where it seems to be most absent, in his crucified and risen Son and our journey with him on the way of the cross. His death throws some theological light on the tsunami and all other natural disasters, for it tells of a God who suffers with us and uses the suffering of his Son to redeem the fallen world.

## A rock that cannot be shaken

We have all been shaken by the recent tidal wave in South East Asia. And that's not bad for us, for this upheaval gets us to check the material, moral, and theological foundations of our lives to see how secure they, in fact, are. Have we built on a solid rock, or on sinking sand? Is there a cosmic rock so secure that it can never be shaken?

As Christians we could join the singer of Psalm 46 in saying: 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.'

**John W Kleinig**  
Australian Lutheran College  
North Adelaide SA