

Are the earthquakes an act of mercy?

The events of the past few months in and around Christchurch have been numbing, quake upon quake, stress upon stress, seemingly at random and with no purpose other than to frighten our city witless. Yet is there some greater purpose, some unseen plan behind the events we have experienced? Could it be that these events are but the most recent manifestations of the merciful God for His children? For those who profess belief in Christianity this angle on describing such unmitigated horror will not be entirely unexpected, as the summation of Christ's death on the cross is mercy. Mercy for the sins of mankind.

How then does one qualify what mercy is? Certainly it is a great mystery, as we are describing what Pope John Paul II as well as saints Augustine and Aquinas, have called the greatest attribute of God – Divine Mercy.

So in a very real sense we are at a loss to adequately describe such transcendence, yet Christians, and even those of other faiths, or no faith, can turn to the cross of Christ to see what the totality of mercy is; utter self sacrifice for undeserving mankind. Undeserving? If we were deserving, it would not be mercy. Undoubtedly these events test our faith, 'as that tested in a fire' yet the Lord uses these events to warn and caution His people.

What is more disturbing though is those who ascribe to God, who blame God, for these acts as though He wills them on us and then use this rationale as an excuse to stop believing or to never seek Him in the first instance. This is the greater tragedy and it is built on the sandy foundation of ignorance, sometimes wilfully, other times through only partial acceptance of truth.

To better understand this reasoning it is necessary to return to the beginning and the account of creation that Christians everywhere know, but in many cases do not accept as truth, rather they see it as a story, or a myth, to help ignorant people understand God. But this is a grave error and one that leads many to distrust, and ultimately, to disbelieve in God, as how could a loving Father God inflict such pain and suffering, through earthquakes or other catastrophes, on His children? And they would be right. No image of God could support such a divergence.

The real divergence we seek to understand here is that of man's will from the will of God, as through this rejection, by Adam and Eve, (their existence as our first parents now proven through genetic tracing; 'mitochondrial eve') we find that both sin and death entered the world.

A perfect world; undeniably, it was paradise, there were no earthquakes. God did not plan or invent suffering or even death, not in the past, nor now in 2011, and He did not will the resultant loss of life in the earthquakes, but he may well use it as a means for our purification and to bring good from this great evil which has struck our city. We might also take cognisance of the fact that our city bears the name of Christ, and we know that God will not be mocked by the intransigence of his sinful children. We also know that, as St Augustine taught, collective sin in a society or nation brings about a collective purification from God. He is always at work in His creation, not only in bringing it about but also in allowing events to remind us of His omniscience and the continual call to return to Him, if we fail to do so He may leave us to the consequences of our actions, which will be disastrous for all.

The loss of belief among many people in the account of creation given in the Bible and the acceptance, either in part or entirety, of evolutionism in its many convoluted forms, is the predominant reason in the world today for the loss of faith in an all powerful God, and the absolute incomprehensibility which suffering and pain present to many people. It is this point which we need to keep in mind when trying to fathom Christianity. Also we need to keep in mind that evolutionism cannot be science, which in its authentic form is the rigorous pursuit of truth, and revealed Truth is none other than God Himself.

Without the reference point of sin, suffering and death are meaningless, and so too is mercy, for if you do not accept the former why would you need mercy, whether or not it is deserved?

Ultimately these events are signs of His everlasting mercy to us for they cause us to turn again to Him to seek His protection and consoling grace. They may also cause some to turn from Him, to reject His mercy and this too is a divergence from God's will as he never wills that any be lost, in the eternal sense, as this is, in God's eyes, the only 'sense' that counts – eternity.

How we actually arrive in eternity is not quite so important in God's eyes, it is the being there that counts for Him. For us though, locked in time, the getting to eternity part of the equation can be intensely painful but this too is part of the formation necessary, it is His mercy to us and if accepted can produce great peace of mind and soul. Collective suffering is also a universal call to aid others in their time of need, and to show the face of Christ to our brothers and sisters. This is the peace which, unknowingly or not, the people of Christchurch and Japan, indeed all humanity, seek both now, and for any future events which threaten our world. As Pope John Paul II, the Great Mercy Pope, once said "Where if not in the Divine Mercy can the world find refuge and the light of hope."

Pat Barrett.