

## **Why did ‘God’ take my baby?**

*An observation on the agony of disaster and the place of faith.*

Revd John Marcon

The mother stood in her doorway, arms folded defensively across her chest. The Vicar, who three months earlier had presided at the funeral of her three year-old daughter, was still emerging from his car.

From the doorway an angry voice, heavy with grief and frustration, demanded -

**“Why did God take my baby?”**

Was this the time for a reasoned theological explanation of God’s prerogatives, or a neatly delivered case for God as the pastor takes up the role of divine advocate or excuse-maker. Should God have overridden the unknown fault in the swimming pool gate that let the child in or have alerted one parent when each thought the little one was with the other? Any one of us with the tiniest measure of humanity would have dived in instantly and rescued the child. In fact, had we not done so and simply watched the child die, we would quite properly have been arrested for failing to act with basic humanitarian commitment and may well have been charged with manslaughter.

**Did God just stand by and watch?**

These were good and loving parents, with commendable family attitudes, surely their Christian commitment would count for something?

There’s all this lovely sentiment about ‘guardian angels’ or in the words of old favourite hymns ‘He’s got the whole wide world – in his hands’ ‘His eye is on the sparrow so I know he watches me’.

None of these contributions to a sentimental journey were a comfort to this distraught mother without her three year old to hug. As they would not be to the parents, teachers and children of Sandy Hook School as they were confronted with the slaughter of their innocents on such a grotesque scale.

**The foundation of our Christian faith is built on God’s total, unconditional and eternal love for every person ever born.**

Every value we hold as an expression of our faith and every humanitarian attitude is expressive of forms of love: grace, mercy, justice, love, forgiveness and integrity, to name just six of them. So where were these values and the One who gave them while the child was drowning, or the children in Sandy Hook, Connecticut were dying so horrendously?

How far back do we go for grotesque human and natural calamities - to Joshua’s slaughter of the people of Jericho, to Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, The ‘Holy’ Inquisition? Before we take comfort in blaming the religious for the world’s injustices we should include the 200 million plus people who died over the last century under the tender mercies of atheists like Hitler and Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, Mussolini and Mugabe.

**We need also to be exceedingly wary of those who claim to know the answer to the problems of evil and the appallingly unjust ways it falls upon people.**

We might even assume that once we get to heaven all will be explained and we will comprehend the full horror of all that has gone wrong. Not necessarily; evil by its very nature does not have logical explanation, for it defies rationality.

Neither is it much help to pass the buck to the devil. Remember the popular song of a few years ago? -

‘Mommy told me something - a little girl should know,  
It's all about the devil and I've learned to hate him so ---'

Letting the sunshine in and facing life with a grin has a certain appeal, but in disaster situations it is not just insensitive but a retreat into denial. Several other forms of folk religion have emerged in the West in recent times. Another version popularised in song is ‘que sera, sera’, ‘whatever will be, will be’. Karma has emerged as ‘what goes around comes around’ - Dr. Horrible’s ‘a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do’ says it all, really.

**These stupefying nonsensical parodies of a life philosophy continue a denial of the pain of wrestling with complex issues.**

We are furnished instead with banal simplistic solutions; capitulations to fatalism. Offering shallow, explanatory theological spin is too often blasphemous. To declare that ‘God understands’ or that ‘God loved the child so much that he wanted her with him in heaven’ is simply sick thinking and a grotesque travesty of all that we know about God. Neither is it helpful for the preacher at a funeral to inform the congregation that “While we do not know why God has ‘taken’ our beloved to himself at this time, all will be revealed in heaven”. The long-suffering of mourners or those afflicted with illness is little relieved by such assurances, quite properly angry at any deity who so callously ‘takes’ their loved ones. Neither will they be reassured by those clerics who offer shallow soporific responses to those so brutally afflicted. When individual losses are multiplied by single incidents that result in the slaughter of many people, all these “Where was God?” type questions are magnified 100-fold.

It is not that God’s shoulders aren’t broad enough to absorb the intensity of our feelings; it’s more that we have been taught or have acquired the idea that God is capable of preventing such catastrophes, so if they are not prevented then we want to know why God apparently refused to act.

**God is presented as all-powerful, and can set aside the laws of the universe or exercise preventative constraints** in order to deny these killers their liberty to inflict carnage, so the question naturally arises again; why did God not intervene?

How often do we hear a testimony – sometimes on public media - of how a survivor experienced a miracle. “God saved me” raises an uncomfortable question – why then did God not save the others who died? The idea that God sits on some heavenly throne saying, “I’ll save that one, but not those two, the next three can die, but I’ll save the remaining ones” is obscene. God did not decide to allow 20 children and 8 teachers to be killed in the Connecticut school shooting and allow all the rest to live. Only the most sinister or sick among us would not save everyone, were it in our power to do so, therefore why assume God would be so sadistically cruel?

**Is God therefore powerless and unable to act to prevent human or natural calamity?**

We need to go back to God’s empowering gifts to creation where a direct divine hand could have been kept on everything so that no development, no response, no action could ever take place that was not directly under divine control.

**All creation would be a collection of puppets, manipulated by the divine hand** to do exactly and always as commanded. There would be no concepts of freedom or choice, no power to think or to exercise those gifts which are fundamental to our experience of humanity. We would not know love, joy, peace, patience, goodwill or grace. Under God’s directive hand these would not only be unnecessary, but they would hinder

the manipulative process. Kermit the Frog and Basil Brush, devoid of human input, lie dull and dead upon the shelf and are always without feelings until we contribute them.

**God chose not to take this course but instead took the much riskier one of gifting humanity the full freedom collectively and individually to be ourselves**, created in the divine image yet with the power to embrace values and practices exactly the opposite of God's gifts of love and grace to us. The consequences of this freedom are profound indeed. God's empowering gifts enable us to joyously celebrate all that is beautiful in ourselves and in each other. As those aware of the wonder of God's utterly faithful love for us all, we continue to offer praise and thanksgiving, motivated entirely by the freedom we have to do so, seeking to practice those characteristics of love in all that we do and advocate.

For those desirous of pursuing an agenda that is distorted and narcissistic, violent, racist, sexist, greedy or misogynistic, the freedom to so act is available. Those acts of destruction that bring suffering to others, leading to degradation and injustice, are fully able to be practised. Humanitarian values, vital for the on-going civilization of society, need to rise above the dehumanising greed that with other forces create the heartbreaking agony of major and so often preventable disasters.

We might wish that God had not permitted the creation of mines and cluster bombs, that go on killing and maiming long after hostilities cease. We might wish that God had sent a spirit of confusion to confound the designers and manufacturers of military assault rifles and had refused life to those who would become the exploiters of children.

**It is not lack of knowledge that hinders us**, but captivity to personal weaknesses and powerful interests whose primary motives are the financial bottom line or tribal/national goals of power and control without regard for the consequences on others. We know how to govern ourselves and our world with justice and righteousness. We are fully aware of our responsibilities to live so that others may also live. We are the recipients of infinite mercy – another gift to offer others. As a Christian community we are further motivated by a line in the Lord's Prayer '— your will be done on earth – *as it is in heaven*'. During the 1960s when graphically violent movies and games began to appear, many of us working among violent people were not reassured by a common professional response that such entertainment would serve as a safety valve, a soporific for our violent tendencies. Even then contrary evidence was mounting that increased violence in media exacerbated violence in those with a propensity towards it. Combined with increasing drug and alcohol problems, especially among the already unstable and the mentally ill, this massively multiplied the problem, but it was unfashionable to receive this information, so the violence has continued to grow.

We have a new Bond movie with 250 acts of violence in 243 minutes. Extremely graphic violence in video games with which so many of our young people grow up appears beyond control. Catering to our base instincts, our fears and our cultural liabilities, is hugely profitable but a sure point of ruination for the victims and their families.

**Improved, affordable mental health services along with the non-availability of weapons may have prevented this latest tragedy**, but so expensive are the U.S. health services – often beyond the capacity of the affected families - and so paralysed are the politicians by the vast resources of the gun lobby that, as in all previous shootings, it is unlikely that much will be done. The ban on military assault weapons may well be re-imposed with a re-evaluation of the Second Amendment, currently called to justify far more than its original intention. The gun culture in the USA costs thousands of American lives and places all citizens at far greater risk than in any other developed country, sadly one heavily reinforced by many conservative and evangelical churches that regard gun possession as almost a Christian obligation.

**It's hard to imagine Jesus and his disciples armed to the teeth to protect themselves on the Jericho Road.**

Gun ownership in the US is surrounded by a prevailing mythology, conveniently constantly re-stated that possession of guns is a duty required to protect and honour the family and deal with any criminal activity, in spite of substantial evidence that families are a lot safer without weapons in the home. Far more family members are killed and injured around the home by other family members than by any other category of people.

**Perhaps the most difficult concept for us to accept is the powerlessness of God**, whose faith in humanity created in the divine image is near absolute. Jesus is entrusted to the care of an ordinary human family, without the benefit of the wondrous array of antenatal, birth and post-natal care services available to today's parents. Born into a nation under siege where the average lifespan was little more than 40 years and where up to half of all children did not live to adulthood, the faith of God in humanity is truly awesome.

Because the power to be free is given to us without divine constraint, the requirement upon us to exercise it responsibly is not just a moral imperative; it is vital for our survival as humans. If God refuses to intervene physically then why do we pray? Prayer is not an attempt to convince a reluctant God to act; it is primarily for our benefit, to reaffirm those treasures of grace and empowerment we need to face all that befalls us, motivating us to work for a gracious, merciful and just world, fulfilling Jesus' prayer that God's will be done. Prayer draws our attention to the God-values that give life its relevance, providing strength with courage at times of great need and the will to act where humanitarian action may enhance the quality and safety of life for us all.

**I began with a true story of the pastoral care of a mother whose three year-old daughter had drowned in the family swimming pool.**

She demanded to know why God had 'taken' her baby. The immediate pastoral response was that the two of them embraced on her doorstep, crying the bitter tears of loss and grief.

This was the time to offer affirmation and support, to heal feelings of unwarranted guilt. Later, it became possible to discuss the theological issues, to accept that God's grief was at least as great as the mother's, that the gift of faith affirms that love is never lost and those whom we love and who are with us no more continue to be recipients of the totality of God's all-embracing grace. We hold to the truth that the gift of life eternal is given freely to everyone; that we will be reunited with those whom we love and who have gone before us. We hold to the truth of the words in Romans 8: 38 – 39 'Nothing shall separate us from the love of God', claiming them for our own. Thus we are given a peace that passes all understanding, from which we pour our energy into practicing and advocating the values inherent in love as we contribute to the healing of our world.

**God has chosen to create us as free people and has provided all we need to live well and enjoy life to the full with the empowering presence of Jesus, Saviour and friend.**

John Marcon

Retired Vicar, Chaplain to Seafarers

Anglican Diocese of Auckland, New Zealand