

## **The Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2011 – ‘Where’s God?’**

**Readings:** Isaiah 49: 8-16a, Matthew 6: 24-34

“But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."

This past week has been a week of stories. We have all heard stories of sadness and tragedy, stories of danger and incredible courage, stories of joy and tears, and of course, possibly the most common stories of all, stories of ‘where I was and what I was doing when I heard about the earthquake’. So now I want to tell you my story.

I was at the second day of a General Synod Standing Committee meeting in Rotorua when the news came through, just about five minutes after the quake, and everything stopped. We had a ridiculously full agenda, as we always do, but none of it mattered much from about 12.55pm on Tuesday afternoon. With us were two representatives from the Christchurch diocese and te hui amorangi ki te waipounamu, and for them this became a time of phone calls, as they tried to find out whether their families were safe. For the rest of us, we prayed, and then the first concern was for our people – our Anglican colleagues – in Christchurch, and I have to say you know things are serious when a bishop doesn’t have time to return an Archbishop’s phone call.

We got hold of the Dean, Peter Beck, and by that stage we had seen pictures of the cathedral, thanks to the miracle that is the iPhone. Peter was the first to tell us people had died, including people in the cathedral.

We composed a message of support and prayers for the people of Christchurch and the wider Canterbury region and we dispatched that within twenty minutes of the quake. And then we stopped. The reality for me, for all of us on General Synod Standing Committee, was that here we were, supposedly the leaders of our three tikanga church, three Archbishops, deans, archdeacons, movers and shakers in the Anglican world, completely helpless to do anything except pray, so we did.

Later that night, in a hotel in Hamilton, I sat with a small group of strangers in the bar watching the television coverage and the experience was very similar. None of us knew each other, but we were all horrified, and we all wanted to do something, but what could we do?

It’s an experience, I know, that was being felt all over the country then and in the days since. Maybe you felt the same way? Helpless, frustrated, wanting to help, but not really knowing how, and that was my story too.

So what about God? Where was God when the quake happened? Did God sit around afterwards, watching the scene of devastation and despair, feeling horrified and helpless? Where was God in the midst of all this? It’s a natural question to ask at times like this, and perhaps some of us just avoid it because the possible answers are just too hard.

I had the beginnings of a sermon in my head as I drove to Rotorua last Monday. I’d read all the readings, and especially the Gospel, and I had a few ideas about what I might say

concerning God who feeds the birds of the air yet cares for us so much more. They all went out the window on Tuesday afternoon.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

How we hear these words from the Sermon on the Mount probably differs greatly today from how it might have been a week ago. It's a lot easier to say, “trust in God for the things you need” when you're not watching people in welfare centres on the TV, people who have lost everything, people who now have no food and no clothing, save for what's on their back and the generosity of strangers.

To be fair, Jesus is talking specifically about money and possessions here. It's a theme he returns to over and over again, and encapsulates starkly in the Lord's Prayer where he tells us to ask for no more than just our daily bread, and he really introduces his focus at the start of today's reading when he warns that a servant can only serve one master; we can't properly serve God when we spend most of our time accumulating and protecting our money and possessions. Perhaps the one part of this reading that might ring truest this morning is the end; again, telling his disciples not to get stuck on building up their portfolios or worrying about retirement funds, Jesus says, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

So when we read about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, that's what this is really about, but still it rings somewhat flat to hear, “do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'” at a time like this. If God really cared so much, why did this awful thing happen in the first place? Why did so many have to lose so much?

I have no answers, or at least not ones that will make much difference. Do I believe that God caused the Christchurch earthquake, or somehow 'let' it happen? No I don't. I don't personally believe that God is in control of the elements or the seas or the tectonic plates. I know that might sound awful to some. There are times when some of us desperately want to believe, to know, that God is in control, but for me that would be even more terrible. If I genuinely believed that God could have stopped this earthquake, and saved these people, but chose not to, I wouldn't be here today, and I would never again wear these robes or this collar. I don't believe God is in control of these things, but I do believe that God is in the midst of them.

I hear those words from Isaiah that we've listened to today; “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” Like a mother, God wants to protect us, and like a father, God wants nothing but the best. But as every parent knows, sometimes no matter what we want or how hard we try, our children get hurt, things go wrong, terrible, awful tragedies happen, yet no matter what, no matter how bad, we always remember our children, and God always remembers us.

The closest thing I have found to an adequate answer to where God is in the midst of disaster is the response of Archbishop Desmond Tutu when asked why God didn't do something about the horrors of apartheid in twentieth century South Africa. 'God did do something,' Tutu said. 'God put you here.'

God puts us here. As last week's readings from Leviticus and the Sermon on the Mount tried to remind us, how we live with each other is how we live out our relationship with God. We are the Body of Christ and in times of terror and trouble it is up to us to be the hands and feet and heart of God, to be Christ for those who live with sadness and suffering. God puts us here, and if anyone is going to make a difference, it will have to be us, somehow, in some way.

It's hard, and it's frustrating, and it's oh so very sad, and maybe, sometimes all we can do is hope and pray, and without really understanding or knowing what it means, trust that the God who held Israel inscribed on the palms of his hands holds us to, and those in Christchurch, and those everywhere who suffer and mourn and cry out for help, and none seems to come.

May God be with them, and with us all. Amen.