

Epiphany 05 (in the light of the tsunami) Jan 6 2005

I think many of us have been doing some hard thinking this week. I was supposed to be preaching about Epiphany - the arrival of the magi at Bethlehem - gold, frankincense and myrrh. Technically it is still Christmas, this is the last day of the Christmas season, but, the nativity play and the warm glow of the Christmas services all seem very distant as we watch the news, as the death toll rises and rises, and as the long term implications of this disaster sink in. Whatever has Epiphany to do with this? People don't want stories from 2000 years ago at times like these. They are asking instead a big and difficult question. "Where is God in all of this?" Where was God when the waves came sweeping in on the beaches of India, Thailand, and Indonesia? Where was God for the fathers who watched their children swept from their arms by the floodwater, who will always blame themselves for not holding on that little bit tighter? Where was God for those whose livelihoods and communities have been wiped away? Where was God for each one of those who disappeared beneath that great wave?

Where is God today for those who are still scrabbling in the wreckage for bodies, searching for their families, struggling to co-ordinate relief efforts? Where is God for the children who are orphans now, too young even to know their names or nationalities?

We have in the last few weeks heard, told, sung, prayed a Christmas story of love and peace, of a God who came to save the world? But there are many who justifiably ask when disaster strikes, "Isn't it all a load of nonsense in the face of the tsunami? A fairy story - a tale for the children which fades away to nothing in the cold light of days like these?" It's a fair point.....Where is God in the mess of the world? Where is hope now? The safe, beautiful "long ago and far away" scenes of the Christmas cards seem a million miles from the reality of the suffering people are facing.

But if our faith seems irrelevant or inadequate now we have only ourselves to blame. If that has happened it is because we have tamed and domesticated it - treated it as a cosy source of emotionally uplifting platitudes or a place to find neat answers for theological conundrums.

That is a great shame, because the faith we follow - was not forged in snug studies by comfortable people at ease with their lives. Most of the Bible comes from "tsunami" times - times when people knew all too well the darkness and the fragility of the world. The Old Testament was brought together when Israel was in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed; people had endured siege and famine. It was this which led them to collect the stories, the poetry, the wisdom that had been passed down by word of mouth in previous centuries. They put them together, in the light of the disasters that had befallen them, into the great account of the enduring love of God which we now have. The New Testament, in the same way, was written by those who faced persecution, terror and death on a daily basis, who knew that at any moment all they had could be taken from them by the brutal Roman rulers.

The Bible is a life raft for a people who are all at sea, written by those who knew what the floods were like, who lived an inch from drowning. The Wise Men in Matthew's story - the story of the Epiphany - are not just quaint historical figures, adding a little colour to the Christmas tale. They are people who were asking in their time the same desperate question that we are asking now. Where is God in the mess of the world? They asked it when they saw that new star rising in the sky. They asked it of Herod when they came to Jerusalem. It was clearly a question they had been asking for a long time. They knew that the Hebrew God had promised to send a child to change the world; they believed it, or at least hoped it might be true, but where would they find him? They really wanted to know the answer. They asked not out of academic curiosity - you don't make such a long, costly and dangerous journey for that - but out of a real hunger. In a sense the wise men in the Gospel today stand for all who have wrestled for faith in a world that seems harsh and arbitrary, where everything you have can be swept away in a moment. They stand for all who dare to hope that God is still at work in even the most desperate situations.

And in the end they find him - in the most unlikely circumstances - a tiny child in a squalid stable.

"Where is God in all of this?" The wise men found their answer in a child in Bethlehem. Every person, in each new generation, must make that search afresh and for themselves. But I do think there is something we can learn from those three ancient travellers. Things which are relevant as we watch, pray and ponder the events in the Indian Ocean, and also as we deal with the tsunamis closer to home: the illness, bereavement, loss in our own lives. The wise men bring with them on their journey three deeply symbolic gifts. They come prepared to make a particular sort of response to the Messiah. They come with a set of expectations which make it much more likely that they will recognise God when they find him. First they come with gold. Finding and following God isn't just an abstract philosophical matter. It doesn't just involve the things of the spirit. If we are serious in our pilgrimage we will be ready to let it have an impact on the material things of our lives as well. The way we earn and spend our money.... The way we spend our time, use our talents. What we are prepared to let go of, give up? How we are prepared to change our values, and challenge the values of those around us?

It's interesting that people's first response to the tsunami has been to give money - millions of dollars of aid from countries all over the world. And that is good - though I hope it is more than a flash in the pan. But people's urge to be generous is a

real sign of God at work. Wise men and women seeking God come prepared to let go of the gold in their lives for the sake of others - not just as a one off, but making generosity and just living become a habit.

But that's not all, and not enough on its own. The wise men came also bearing frankincense. Frankincense was, and still is, used in prayer. It symbolises openness to a world beyond, beneath, behind, the world we can see and touch. It symbolises an openness to mystery - to the God who is infinitely greater than we can grasp, who may act in ways we've never thought of. We see on the news reports the pictures of people of all faiths all over the globe praying, reflecting, lighting a candle, simply being still. We often feel - we often are - helpless in the face of tragedy. Our understanding fails..... Our ability to act fails. If we are serious in our search for truth we need to accept that we don't already have the answers. Wise men and women searching for God today need to bear the frankincense that leads them into prayer..... that says..... I don't know it all..... I'm open to God's unknown future..... to what he may do next, not just what he has done already. Gold and frankincense.

But there's a third gift too..... The gift of myrrh. Myrrh for embalming the dead. A bitter herb, a foretaste of the suffering that this child, and those who followed him, would have to face. If we are serious about our search for God at work in the mess of the world, it is no good thinking that the journey will be without pain. Many of us will have felt the urge to turn away, turn over, as the words and images of the floods poured into our living rooms. We often have the same urge when it comes to the pain of those in our communities who need our help, and to our own pain too. We'd rather not go there. But the message of the wise men is that myrrh is an inescapable part of the journey. If God is to be found on those Asian beaches at all, it will be by the people who have the courage to go there, to stay there, and by those who live there already who find the strength to rebuild and hope again.

If we are to find God at work in the painful places of our lives, he will be found as we face the suffering that is part of our lives honestly, sticking with the questions, not hiding behind platitudes and hoping it will all go away. We won't find and follow God in the mess of the world if we try to leave the myrrh behind, avoid the death, take the easy route. God is found in the messiness and suffering. When the world suffers, God is there, God weeps too.

Gold, frankincense, myrrh. The things we need as we search for the Christ Child - God's new beginning - God's hope for the world. As the world cries out, "Where is God?" - do we have gold - the commitment to give what it costs to find him...? Frankincense - the openness to admit that we don't have the answers all sewn up already....? Myrrh - the courage to face and to share the suffering of the world?

Encountering the Christ has a profound impact on us all. It has the power to change and transform us. The wise men were overwhelmed with joy and they fell to their knees and worshiped Jesus. We are told that after offering their gifts the wise men left for their own country by another road. We too are never the same afterwards - we also return to our world via a different path, a new direction. Christianity is not a crutch for weakness.... or a feel-good club for soft sentimentalists. The Gospel, once we take it seriously and allow it to confront and challenge us has immense power. Power to transform....transform us, our community and our world.

Let us pray for commitment and courage to face the challenges life brings us as we walk this powerful path of transformation.