

**Chichester Cathedral**  
**Fourth Sunday of Epiphany (Education Sunday)**  
**11.00am Eucharist, 31 January 2010**

Today's psalm speaks of God as a stronghold, a rock and a fortress; images of solidity and permanence. Rocks don't tend to split open under your feet, nor fortresses crumble around your ears – and yet they did in Haiti just three weeks ago. Following the devastating earthquake there, and its aftershock, the emphasis has rightly been on practical help, and getting aid to the right people and places. Church leaders have tended to dodge the inevitable questions about why God has allowed this, saying 'this is no time for theology' and exhorting us rather to prayer and action. In the Cathedral we've been raising money for Haiti hospital, rather than having seminars on the problem of evil.

Fair enough, but only up to a point: for the difficult questions won't go away. Last Sunday a member of the congregation asked me what to say to an eight year old girl asking challenging questions about why God had allowed the earthquake in Haiti. Many other children will have done the same, and Holocaust Memorial Day this past week will have raised even more difficult questions.

Who'd be a parent or a teacher in such situations? What can you possibly say that doesn't fob the children off with something glib or fatuous? Or, by avoiding the question, give the impression that nothing can be said? And yet some people seem to have a knack for helping people struggle with difficult questions; indeed for teachers this is part of the job, part of the vocation.

Today is Education Sunday. The theme this year is 'Called to Serve' - the calling of all Christians to be co-workers with God in building his Kingdom, not least in the world of education; as teachers, governors, support staff and in other roles. To approach this topic of 'Called to Serve' by way of earthquake, disaster and human evil may seem strange, but in fact reflects the context of today's readings. Consider Jeremiah, for example, called into God's service at a time of national catastrophe and tragedy: the fall of Judah to Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. If we'd read on to verse 14 rather than stopping at verse 10, we'd have heard the Lord saying to Jeremiah, 'disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land.'

This is the kind of biblical perspective from which to begin our own attempts to make sense and find comfort. We are not the first to find our

faith tested by terrible events, wondering where God was or is, and how God could allow it. The Old Testament records a whole history of national suffering, from slavery to exile, as well as individual pain. When we get to the New Testament, the action takes place in an occupied land, with fear and violence never far away, from the slaughter of the innocents that accompanies Christ's birth, to the crucifixion itself. In today's gospel Jesus comes close to being lynched.

The Bible never suggests that life in this world is easy or without its struggles for people of faith. And yet in the midst of suffering and bewilderment, God carries on calling people to serve Him. In the Old Testament, God's response to human evil is to work through the all too human people of Israel. God will not give up on His creation, but work from within it through his creatures. It may be untidy, but it's the only way.

The story of Israel culminates in the New Testament, where God works through not so much a people, as a person. In the Gospels we see the destructive powers of evil at their worst – the force of Rome and Pilate, the hostility of Herod and the Pharisees, the falling short of Peter and Judas, the destructiveness of the mob. But in Christ the forces of evil burn themselves out, as he responds in a radically new way – by enduring and forgiving even when facing and then experiencing death. The New Testament has no neat philosophical solution to difficult questions, but rather offers a series of events in which evil is confronted and exhausted.

If God works primarily through suffering love, as the Bible teaches us that He does, particularly in Christ, then so must his Church. The challenge for the Church is to proclaim and live the Christian story in a way that takes evil and suffering seriously (both practically and intellectually) but also celebrates the creativity and redemptive power of God.

So what to say to that eight year old girl? Well, let's start with what not to say. Pat Robertson, the American TV evangelist, was recently described by a *Church Times* journalist as 'famous Evangelical preacher and 24 carat idiot.' The reason for this description was Robertson's description of the Haiti earthquake as God's punishment for a historical pact the people of Haiti had made with the devil. Such a way of thinking is also found in the sermons of John Wesley, when he attributed the terrible Lisbon earthquake of 1755 to God's punishment on Roman Catholics. I wonder how many contemporary Christians still think like this?

It's surely a terrible thing to say the people of Haiti are to blame for what has happened to them. Yet I suppose it's tempting for some to think this way because it offers an easy if horrible explanation, of otherwise apparently inexplicable events. There is no easy way out here. Christians affirm in the creed that God is the 'maker of all that is'. We can't say God did the best he could with the raw materials that happened to be available to Him. This is God's world, through and through, brought into being by God, sustained by God, and God is ultimately responsible for all that happens.

The trouble is, we don't know what it's like to be Creator, and if it's possible to create a world like ours, in all its beauty and richness, only without earthquakes. I don't know enough about the structure of our planet, or plate tectonics, to judge the claims of more scientifically knowledgeable Christians than me, that such things as earthquakes are an inevitable consequence of having a planet suitable for life. I am prepared to trust, however, that God knows what He is about, and something like this must be the case. And I am sure that in the face of catastrophe, the Christian response is not only to do what we can to alleviate the suffering, but also to work towards a world better able to cope with future disasters. For every event of this kind tends to be made worse by the kind of world human beings have made for themselves – and so part of the tragedy of Haiti is the poverty that has blighted the island, resulting in far too many substandard buildings and poor infrastructure.

Here we are in the territory of human sinfulness, where one wonders at times about God's wisdom in giving freedom and free will to his creatures. And yet our faith affirms a central purpose in creation is to provide a world in which it's possible for human beings to mature, and to freely make loving relationships with God and one another. Our faith affirms that God has not only called each of us into existence, and endowed each of us with a unique mixture of gifts and limitations, but has also called each of us to co-workers in building his kingdom.

Last week was the feast of the conversion of Paul. Today he waxes lyrical in 1 Corinthians 13 about faith, hope and love, but last Monday we heard how he persecuted Christians with relentless fury. We heard how he fell from his horse on the Damascus road, blinded by the light of God. So should we date Paul's calling to that dramatic adult experience? If we just read the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles, we might think so. But Paul himself,

writing to the Galatians, writes in similar terms to the calling of Jeremiah: 'God set me apart from before I was born, and called me through his grace.'

God called Paul, as he calls each of us, from before we are even born. There was never a time when God was not inviting us into relationship with Him. Some of us may need a dramatic conversion to bring us back to God, others may not. But whatever our particular story, God has called us, and the gifts we have come from Him, and find their proper expression in serving Him and building His kingdom. If you have the gifts to be a chorister, as Jake and Ben do, use those gifts to his glory. If you have the gifts of teaching, use them in the service of others. If you can bring your experience to bear as a school governor, that is excellent work for a follower of Christ to be doing. Sometimes the impression is given that only those serving the internal life of the Church have proper vocation or calling. Nothing could be further from the truth, for the Church only exists for the sake of God's world and God's kingdom.

Being a teacher can be tough, as can any walk of life. But hopefully none of us here will ever have to face something as devastating as the people of Haiti. But whatever we or they go through, nothing can take away from God's calling of every person, before even they were born. That doesn't mean God will magic away the pain, but it does mean that in the providence of God no life is wasted or lost. The God who calls us into existence also calls us to our ultimate home with him. In the end we all go to God, the God who made all things, the God who knows our sorrows to the bone, the God who stoops down to us even as He receives our loved ones where there is no more crying and where every tear is wiped away.

In the mean time, though - considering questions about calling, and about evil and suffering, can never be about simply increasing our understanding: it is about being part of the solution, co-workers in building God's Kingdom, in lives of holiness and prayer and practical engagement. AMEN