

## **A disaster of biblical proportions**

Questioning my faith was the last thing on my mind this Christmas. But the tidal wave which swept the Indian Ocean rim on the day after Christmas has carried faith in its wake.

“He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all.” So I gladly sang, and want to sing. But what does Christmas mean after the deluge? If Jesus could walk on the waters and calm the sea, what does it mean now to sing of him as Lord of all?

Two hundred and fifty years ago, the earthquake which shattered Lisbon became a symbol of God’s felt absence from ‘Christian’ Europe. The Christian story ceased to shape the imagination of many, replaced by faith in ‘reason’, and later ‘science’.

The catastrophe of Christmas 2004 will likewise shape the imaginations of Indian Ocean peoples for generations. It is a faith-shifting, myth-making event – but what sort of myth, what type of faith?

The ancient Hebrews feared water. Too much water, and there is irresistible destruction. Too little, and life evaporates. The Bible opens against the background of dark waters of the deep (Genesis 1:2). The great flood which swept away all but a remnant of living things stands early in the biblical story. But the defining event for the Hebrews was God rescuing them from obliteration at the Red Sea, to cross the waters of Jordan into the land of promise.

In whom then can we place our faith? In God, who gave light and life in the face of the deep, rescued organic life from flood, gave the rainbow as a sign of divine rule over nature and its seasons, and used the waters to save? The faithful of old knew that such faith was neither simple nor easy:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck ...  
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.  
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. (Psalm 69:2-3)

Such desperate pleas have this Christmas been on many, many lips, of whatever faith or none. These pleas echo Jesus’ cries from the cross, the centre of Christian faith. If the one who walked on water and stilled the storm struggled with faith when the flood-waters of death swept over him, I am in good company wrestling with faith.

But what does such re-shaped faith mean for 2005? Certainly practical compassion for all who suffer in Aceh, Sri Lanka, Phuket ... But also repentance for our part in a lifestyle which forces multitudes to live in marginal places of this earth; hope that civil wars might cease in the face of the common enemy of death; and openness to Australia becoming more evidently part of Asia. These are the true ‘acts of God’ for 2005 and beyond.

On the personal level, such faith knows more deeply my own mortality, and that of my nation, of the human race, of this earth, and so is more humble. And such faith longs to embrace the hope of a renewed creation, that these present pains are birth-pangs rather than those of dying.

Provided by the Revd Dr Charles Sherlock

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