



GOD, KATRINA AND JUDGMENT

Brian Edgar
Director of Public Theology

When a natural disaster such as hurricane Katrina or last year's tsunami strikes, some people blame God and use this as a reason for refusing to have anything to do with religion. And even when a disaster quite clearly involves human actions, as with the events of September 11, God is frequently implicated because he failed to prevent it happening.

These mis-understandings of God's nature are unfortunate, but are perhaps understandable as they come from those who do not really pretend to know or understand God. Of far greater concern are the terrible assertions of some Christians who *do* claim to know the mind of God.

There are always those who seek to exonerate God from blame by the unfortunate tactic of blaming the victims and describing such events as an appropriate judgment on particularly wicked people and situations.

- September 11, for example, is a sign of God's judgment on America for failing to support Israel.
- The tsunami becomes God's judgment on non-Christian nations.
- Hurricane Katrina is judgment on New Orleans for its sexual licentiousness, especially as it came shortly before its annual gay pride festival.

The victims who have suffered so much thus have insult added to their injury by not only being blamed for their suffering but for being particularly wicked people deserving of special punishment.

Apart from anything else, there is a lack of logic in this as the people who suffered disproportionately were often not those who perpetuated the nominated evils but were the poor, the frail and the less able.

But even more serious than a lack of logic is the failure of Christians to know the scriptures on such matters. They ought to remember Jesus' words as recorded about three similar situations instead of relying (as they so often do) solely on Old Testament passages. They would then learn two important lessons.

The first is that laying blame on individuals in this way is un-Christ-like.

- The disciples saw a man blind from birth and asked Jesus who was to blame for this – the man or his parents. Jesus' immediate answer is quite clear: 'neither this man nor his parents sinned.' (John 9:1-3). The attempt to lay blame for this tragedy was clearly misconstrued.

- On another occasion a number of Galileans had been murdered by Pilate the governor. Jesus asked, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?’ And the answer to his own question is quite direct, ‘I tell you, no!’ (Luke 13: 1-2). The answer is emphatic: blaming the victim is wrong.
- Thirdly, Jesus referred to a tower in Siloam which fell down and killed 18 people. The question he addressed, which was something of a talking point at the time was, ‘were these people more guilty than other people living in Jerusalem at the time?’ And the answer is, again, clear and emphatic, ‘I tell you, no!’ (Luke 13:4-5). Clearly, Jesus resisted any and all attempts to tie together cause and effect at an individual level.

Consequently, Christians that circulate material which perpetuates this sort of blame game in the context of the tsunami or hurricane Katrina should be ashamed of their lack of understanding of the scriptures. But that is only the first point.

The second is that Jesus turns the finger of blame that is pointed at others right back on those who are so eager to criticize and judge. This is so typical of Jesus!

After making sure that the individuals involved in the incidents referred to above are not blamed for their suffering Jesus goes on to make another point, that suffering *is* connected with sinfulness.

If I punch you in the face, I have sinned, but you suffer. That sort of thing happens all the time though it is rarely quite so directly connected on a one-to-one basis. It is more likely, for example, that a disastrous car-crash comes about as the result of a combination of less than perfect road design, a society which allows cars to travel in opposite directions on the same road at 100kph, a distraction caused by another person, a lack of experience and perhaps a somewhat careless attitude. So, who or what is to blame? Ultimately, all of us.

And sin is even involved with so-called ‘natural disasters’ as the world as a whole is distorted by human sin (Romans 8:20-22). Jesus’ point is that people ought not use such occasions to point a finger of blame at others but as an opportunity to reflect upon where they are involved in sin themselves.

- In the case of the man born blind the healing itself is described in a mere seven verses but it is followed by a further 34 verses re-counting the problem the Pharisees had with this and the theological investigation that took place (John 9:1-41). This concludes with a discussion of the *real* problem: the spiritual blindness of those who resist the One who forgives sins. The Pharisees start to understand what Jesus is on about and ask, ‘Are *we* blind?’ and Jesus’ response concludes this passage, ‘If you were blind you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.’ Those who point the finger of blame should be more concerned to see their own guilt and their need for repentance.
- In the case of the Galileans murdered by Pilate Jesus makes sure that they are not seen as being to blame for their own deaths but he then challenges those around him by saying, ‘but unless you repent, you too will all perish.’ (Luke 13:3). In other words, don’t go around pointing the finger at others, but use this as a time to reflect on where *you* stand before God.
- It is the same in the discussion of the tower of Siloam. He challenges the listeners with, ‘Unless you repent, you too will all perish.’ (Luke 13:5) He turns the finger back and challenges them... you.... and me.

The final point to make is that disasters ought to bring about change rather than judgmentalism. The appropriate response to the disasters we observe is thus repentance but repentance is not just about feeling guilty, it is more about changing the way we live. And as the issues involved in these disasters cannot be directly attributed to individuals the appropriate response will likely involve some corporate or social change as much as any individual change. In the USA, for instance, evangelical Christians associated with Sojourners (see <http://www.sojo.net/>) are promoting the Katrina pledge which accepts that the hurricane has revealed fault lines of race and class in their nation 'washing away our national denial about the large number of Americans who live in poverty and about its disproportionate impact on people of color'. In the aftermath of the storm's destruction they are seeking a new America in which compassion and conscience reshape society's priorities at all levels.

There are important principles involved here which we would do well to observe. How can we help change the world in which we live where disasters such as these occur?