

Does God Hate Queensland?

By Andrew Dutney

The journalist sounded conflicted as she asked me the question. It was meant as a joke – gallows humour as the nation watched cyclone Yasi bear down on the north coast. It was meant partly as bait too. She was half hoping for one of those religious-nutter quotes about God’s judgement on some pet abomination (usually to do with sex). A headline is a headline, after all.

But there was also sincerity to her question. She’d been thinking about it. They’d been talking it over in the newsroom and she’d been delegated to put the question to me. Over the space of a few months our corner of the world has been devastated by storms, floods, fire, and earthquakes of Biblical, even apocalyptic proportions. You’re a religious person. You believe in God. How do you make sense of this catastrophic summer in Australia and New Zealand?

Which Christian leader hasn’t been asked something like that this summer? Which Christians haven’t asked it of themselves? It’s an excellent theological conversation starter and, for a while in the early modern period, theologians just loved being asked about it.

Theodicy

If God is good and all-powerful why do the innocent suffer? Examples of Christian answers to that question can be found as early as the second century but “theodicy”, which means the justification of God, became a characteristic preoccupation of *modern* theology. The term was first used only at the turn of the eighteenth century, by the German philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716). In less than a century “theodicy” had come to refer not just to the theological problem of suffering and evil but to the whole of philosophical theology. The whole idea of “God” was being entirely re-thought for the modern world - and it was being re-thought in the face of evil, disaster and human suffering.

The theodicies of the modern period drew primarily on two ancient Christian traditions. One is associated with St Augustine (354-430) - the Bishop of Hippo, in North Africa and the theological genius whose insights (and blind spots) have dominated western Christianity. The other tradition is

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associated with Irenaeus (c130-c200) - the Bishop of Lyons and the first systematic theologian, whose teaching became a touchstone of orthodoxy.

In the Augustinian theodicies it is affirmed that God created a perfect world. The perfection of creation involved human beings having free will. This risked the misuse of that God-given freedom and, primordially, that is just what happened. Adam fell, and we all went down with him. Suffering enters the world as a result of this sin, the abuse of human freedom. Even natural disasters have their origins here. Personal suffering is a symptom of sin. As such it is a call to repentance, to receive the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice, namely, our restoration to our proper place in relation to God and ultimately to Paradise, in which suffering will be no more.

The Irenaean theodicy takes a different tack. It too affirms the perfection of God’s creation, but at the *end* of history not at the beginning. In the beginning creation and humanity is immature. It needs the challenges of nature, life and history to grow and reach its potential. In a sense, suffering is a necessary part of creaturely life - although it is unnecessarily intensified and compounded by sin. So our experiences of suffering may be a symptom of sin but at a deeper level they are an indication that we are a work-in-progress. Our experiences of suffering are an invitation to spiritual growth, to enter more deeply into Christ, to share in his suffering and therefore to grow into communion with God which is our destiny.

While they approach the problem in different ways, these two traditions have some things in common. They both affirm the goodness of creation and creaturely life. They both acknowledge suffering as an expected and explicable part of creaturely life. They both make God responsible for suffering and they both justify God by projecting good results from our experiences of suffering.

The end of theodicy

There is a long and pretty discouraging history of the church using a version of theodicy to reinforce its dominance in the face of natural disasters - that plague, fire, flood, or earthquake is God judging you. Repent and submit again to the church’s

discipline. This habit was broken with the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755. For every sermon announcing the judgement of sin at that time, there was now the overarching scrutiny of the Enlightenment. Voltaire took the opportunity to critique Leibniz' theodicy.

“Will you say: ‘This is the result of eternal laws directing the acts of a free and good God!’? Did Lisbon, which is no more, have more vices than London and Paris immersed in their pleasures? Lisbon is destroyed, and they dance in Paris.”

Rousseau, Kant and others drove the judgment home. From a philosophical point of view, theodicy doesn't work.

Now there is a consensus among theologians that the philosophers are right. Or at least, that theodicy works for some but not all cases. There are far too many examples of suffering which are so grotesque or so excessive that they make it impossible to devise an explanation that is both rational and morally tolerable. In any case, it would be offensive even to try to explain such suffering away.

Leonard Sweet once noticed something else that is even more significant. Christians (as distinct from theologians) have rarely adopted a “chivalrous attitude toward God”, jumping to the defence of God's reputation when it seems compromised by the fact or extent of suffering. Stanley Hauerwas has commented on the same tendency. For Christians, the experience of suffering does not challenge belief in God *as such*, but rather forces the question, *Where* in this suffering is the God *in whom I believe*? Secular moderns, on the other hand, experience suffering as, among other things, a confirmation of their *already established non-belief*. That is, not only do theodicies not work philosophically, even if they did work they do not actually make any difference to whether or not one *believes* in God!

Theodicy is a cop out. Stay in your head, in the realm of ideas, and you don't actually have to deal with what's going on in your body and your life – much less that of your neighbour.

Lament

There is another tradition to resource us this summer – the Biblical tradition of *lament*. Of course there were the Bible's Deuteronomists who explained disaster and prosperity in terms of God's punishment and reward. There were the Bible's prophets who looked at the failing crops or invading armies and saw the hand of God meting out what the nation deserved. There were also the Bible's poets and liturgists of lament, who named before God the suffering of ordinary people in national disasters – in excruciatingly faithful detail – calling in that moment for God's presence and solidarity and, ultimately, for God's justice.

There is suffering which will not be explained into quietness by church leaders, philosophers or theologians. It has been part of the experience of the last generation or so that we begin to make sense of suffering not by explaining it, but by feeling it and lamenting it. In some ways the failure of theodicy actually

releases us for this. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed,

“Because Christians - and, I might add, the community over time that has given us the Hebrew Scriptures - do not think they have a stake in God's being “blameless”... they see no reason to refrain from expressing their pain.”

There is nothing essentially disloyal or faithless in naming what we suffer and articulating our pain. Indeed, grieving well is a source of healing.

In the end, community

Moreover, it has been part of the experience of the last generation or so that we begin to make sense of suffering not by heroic or virtuoso individual efforts but *together*, in friendship and community. To quote again from Stanley Hauerwas,

“Historically speaking, Christians have not had a ‘solution’ to the problem of evil. Rather, they have had a community of care that has made it possible for them to absorb the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations.”

Making sense of suffering is something that we do together, as friends in community. For theologians like me, the way to address the fact and extent of suffering is no longer in the exploration of theodicy but in the exploration of ecclesiology - the study of the nature, function and formation of Christian community and friendship.

In times of disaster there are signs of the Spirit that Christian leaders need to help their communities to discern, name and gently (very gently) emphasise.

It turns out that our possessions *are* less important than our family, friends and neighbours. It turns out that we *can* trust strangers to enter our (shattered) homes and deal gently with our treasures – in fact we rely on them to do so. It turns out that my neighbours need *does* matter more to me than my own in this situation. It turns out that sitting in the rubble of the lives that we'd worked so hard to create we *can* laugh and experience genuine joy in the inexplicable gift of being alive – together. It turns out that when we look up and see what natural disaster means in Haiti and Pakistan we *do* recognize in a new way the responsibilities – the opportunities to help – that go with the advantages enjoyed by Australians and New Zealanders even in times of devastation. Who knew?

None of this justifies the disasters. None of it lets God off the hook. None of it counsels against the use of lament but it can give real hope. This is not the end of us. This is not the last word. We are in this together – and God is with us.

Does God hate Queensland? The *short* answer is, No!

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