

REMEMBERING OUR FAITH | *a biblical and theological reflection*

One of the most devastating natural disasters of recent times was the tsunami that hit on 26 December 2004, following a massive earthquake deep in the Indian Ocean.

Confronted by graphic reports and television footage of terrible destruction and an increasingly horrific death toll, Australians responded immediately with an unprecedented level of giving. The Australian Government also moved very quickly to offer a significant aid package. However, immediate relief aid is only part of the solution. The tsunami's effects have lingered long after our giving has slowed. Those people who survived are still vulnerable. Homes, communities and infrastructure are still to be rebuilt and repaired. To make matters worse, many of the problems that existed in tsunami-affected regions before the disaster have been exacerbated.

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While Australians responded so generously to the Boxing Day tsunami, we are generally unpredictable and inconsistent in our reactions. People's lives are affected every day of the year by social injustice and natural disasters, and most of the time we barely even notice. The tsunami's effects will be long-lasting in many places because of the failure of Australia and other affluent nations to be consistent and generous neighbours, both as individuals and as nations. Being generous on one occasion is not enough to satisfy the call of Jesus Christ to be neighbour to those who need our help, wherever and whenever that happens.

- Effective disaster response and rebuilding require highly developed government administration and services. The effects of the tsunami are long lasting in countries where there is violence or high levels of poverty. Australian aid is abysmally low, only 0.26% of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), instead of the 0.7% we promised as part of our commitment to the Millennium Development

Goals. The effects of the tsunami would be less long-lasting in some countries if our aid commitment was more generous year by year.

- Each year hundreds of thousands of women and children are trafficked for slave labour and the sex trade. The inability to rebuild communities and their economic base quickly after the tsunami, as well as the lack of long term, consistent aid has rendered women and children in those regions more vulnerable to human trafficking.
- The UN estimates that seven million children die unnecessarily each year from diseases that can be cured and from unclean water that could be made safe. If money which poor countries pay to the rich world in debt service was spent instead on tackling poverty, the lives of millions of children in poor countries would be saved. Several countries affected by the tsunami have serious debt problems. The Australian Government has been reticent about debt relief for countries affected by the tsunami.
- In some places, communities, infrastructure and services had been damaged by violence before the tsunami. Inadequate investment in and support of peacemaking efforts in these regions by wealthy nations compounded the difficulties of aid and reconstruction efforts after the tsunami.
- People in places damaged by the tsunami need the rebuilding to focus on their main needs and aspirations. Nations giving aid also have agendas and aspirations. That is why it is generally most useful for aid to go through a "multilateral institution", that is, the United Nations. Australia has given its post-tsunami aid "bilaterally", that is, directly from Australia to the countries it is helping. This can be a dangerous approach because it allows decisions to be made on the basis of good outcomes for Australia, for example, through the use of Australian companies and products, rather than on good outcomes for the people affected. Even aid can be a form of exploitation and control.

Justice | Peace

These matters are explored in more detail elsewhere in this booklet. The question now is: what does our faith say to us?

In Old Testament times, the people of God often assumed that the good or bad that happened to people was their reward or punishment for the way they behaved. This view is evident in the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 27-28. In its negative and fearful form it is a theology of retribution: bad things happen to bad people. In contemporary, affluent society, it is often found in the guise of “prosperity theology”, the pretence that if you are affluent and healthy, then this is a sign of God’s blessing. Both versions are dangerous, lacking in compassion, and blind to God’s graciousness.



Photo © Uniting International Mission

A woman collects water at a camp for displaced people west of Banda Aceh, Indonesia

A whole book of the Old Testament is devoted to undermining this theology – the book of Job. When Job suffered calamity after calamity, his friends decided – although they knew that he was a good man and had no evidence of any sin on his part – that if Job was suffering, Job must be sinful. Job, knowing that he had committed no sin, believed that

he should not be suffering, and God was therefore unjust. This clash of views is repeated in various forms throughout the book. As Job’s anger and his sense of betrayal rises, he sees the world as it really is – a world where many good people die, and some people whose terrible evil is evident to everyone, live long, prosperous and healthy lives. Trapped within his theology of retribution, Job can only conclude that God is unjust and that the world is an unjust place. His friends, instead of understanding how one might draw this conclusion, see this as the ultimate heresy and proof that he is in fact evil and deserving of his fate.

With no other alternative, Job calls on God to vindicate him. Very few people meet God “face to face” or have discussions with God. Such a meeting is called a “theophany”. Job is one of those privileged people. Some people think God is very hard on Job, but we need to understand that the conversation in Job 38-41 is a “wisdom contest” – a game in which God tests Job’s claim to be right and to be wise. To be challenged by God in this way is a great honour. In this contest, God challenges Job to see the world more clearly and to recognise that the natural world works according to its own laws, and does not exist for the purpose of rewarding or punishing human beings.

What has this to do with justice and rebuilding nations? The lessons of Job teach us that God’s favour is not a result of our actions, and natural disaster not a punishment for evil doing. Building justice and peace is our responsibility.