

God after the Earthquake in Haiti

A sermon preached in Chester Cathedral at the service of Mattins on Sunday, January 24, 2010, by Canon Trevor Dennis, Vice Dean

How can we believe in a loving God after the earthquake in Haiti? How can we believe in a God who in any way is God, when so many were crushed to death in an instant, or died a slow death in agony and fear, when so many bodies still lie trapped in layers of concrete, when so many have been left terribly injured or traumatized or mad, when so many children have been left on their own, when so many children have lost their friends as well as their families, when so many people have no news yet of loved ones or colleagues, but fear the very worst? How can we believe in God, a God worth our worship, after *that*?

Well, we are still here, you and I, here in Chester Cathedral this morning, to pray and sing to God. Yet someone might say, "Well, it's alright for you; none of you were caught in the earthquake; none of you have family or friends or colleagues on the island." That may be so, but I am not surprised we are still here. For we have met God, and found God's love. For those who haven't, then God becomes a matter of argument, his existence or otherwise and his character something to be worked out. Then belief in God after Haiti can seem irrelevant, bizarre, even ridiculous: "You believe in a God of love, do you? Well stand on every street in Port-au-Prince and see, and smell and hear! Where's your precious God of love now? Oh you believe in an all-powerful God, do you? Then why didn't he prevent the earthquake? Is an earthquake mightier than your God? Or is it just he doesn't care? So either you've got a God who cares, but whose love doesn't amount to a row of beans, because he can't actually *do* anything, or you've got a God who could do something, but is indifferent to all the terrible suffering of the world."

It is easy enough to come up with these arguments if you have never met God, and it is easy enough then to think there is no answer to them. But we have met God, you and I. For us God is not a matter of argument (though of course we don't switch off our rational thinking when we come to worship: we are, after all, meant to love God with all our *mind*, as well as all our 'soul' and all our 'strength'). We have seen God, you and I, found God within touching distance in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and in this very Cathedral; we have watched God, felt God, washing our feet; we have seen and heard and yes, smelled God pinned to a brutal cross, dying a slow and agonizing death. Haiti does not bring us to disbelief; it brings us to our knees. It brings us to prayer, to pray for those left for dead in the chaos of the rubble, to pray for the injured, the bereaved, the traumatized, the ones driven mad, the ones left on their own; to pray for the children and the sick and the pregnant women; to pray for those who have escaped through the broken walls of their prison, and those who seek to keep order on the streets; to pray for those still searching for bodies of loved ones; to pray for those caring for the injured, and for those distributing food and water and medicines; to pray for those co-ordinating the relief effort on the ground, or in the UN, or the United States, or in countries such as ours; to pray for those who still wait for news; to pray for politicians as they begin to address the questions, how can the people of Haiti be helped in the longer term? how can good government be established there and sustained? By God, all these people need our prayers, and they need our generosity with our money, also.

Yet, there are a few more things to be said, not in an attempt to provide answers, for there are none, not as any kind of bid to make sense of Haiti, for no sense can be made of tragedy, but by way of alternative reflection.

The first thing I want to say sounds harsh. This world we live in is not created for our convenience. We human beings are late-comers, very-late-comers on the scene, and by the time we arrived, the earth had seen upheavals and catastrophes on a far larger and more devastating scale than the earthquake in Haiti of Tuesday, January 12, 2010. Last Tuesday, a week after the earthquake, there was a fascinating programme on BBC2 called 'How Earth Made Us', when the geologist Iain Stewart explained how many cities had been built since ancient times on fault lines in the Earth's crust, because that is where minerals like copper or iron are brought up to or near the surface, and where water gushes forth or is available if you dig deep enough for it. Jericho was the earliest of these places, and archaeologists have found evidence, Iain Stewart said, for 15 earthquakes having struck the town over the centuries – remember the story in Joshua 6 of the walls of Jericho falling flat and the population perishing? San Francisco is another city built on a fault line; Port-au-Prince another.

But that might make it sound as though God has no concern for us when the fault line cracks, or the geological plates grind against one another, and the ground begins a sudden dance of death. We have met with God and know his concern is overwhelming. We know the truth of Jesus' saying "Even the hairs of your head are all counted." We know the truth of the verse in the Psalms, "You have kept count of my tossing to and fro in misery; you have put my tears in your bottle." The hairs on the head of each and every person in Haiti, young and old, alive, trapped, dying or dead, are all counted by God. The tears of each one are in his bottle and held tight in his hand.

To their tears are added the tears of God himself. We have a tale to tell of God, you and I, and it reaches a climax in a man dying in agony on a cross. Stand beneath that cross and look into that man's face, we say, and you will begin to understand God. And lest you think that was the end of the story, come back again on the third day and stand outside an empty tomb and weep there with Mary of Magdala and wait. God will come to you then, with the marks of crucifixion upon him and will call you by name.

God weeps also in Haiti, but his tears glisten with the light of resurrection. Look for God in Haiti and you will find him pinned to the cross of people's suffering and pain. Look for God in Haiti and you will find him holding each person, dead or alive, in his arms. Look for God in Haiti and you will find him in all acts of kindness and resourcefulness, in all attempts to bring relief, in the eyes of those who tend the injured and the sick, or provide for those in desperate need, or take in the children from the streets.

Look for God in Haiti and you will find him in all glimmers of resurrection. Look for God, and you will find him in prayer.

Canon Trevor Dennis, Vice Dean