

Imagine today's gospel as a headline in the front page section of a Jerusalem daily newspaper in the lifetime of Jesus: "*Blood Bath in the Temple, Pilate Slaughters Suspected Galilean Terrorists*". The natural assumption at the time would have been that they must have done something wrong to offend God and thus deserved it. Letters to the editor from that time period would have reflected such thinking.

In another article below, we read: "*Tower of Siloam Collapses, 18 People Feared Dead.*" This was an accident related to renovation work on the control tower of the water supply, for which Pilate had hired Jewish workers to do so. Again, the common belief would have been that this was God's punishment of the workers because they had co-operated with Pilate in his construction project.

We could very well replace their headlines with ours today: "*Over 200,000 die in Haiti quake*" and "*100's feared dead in an earthquake in Chile*" or *Suicide bomber kill 36.*"

Incredibly some still today share in the same belief of Jesus' day in light of such tragedies, such as Pat Robertson who claimed the quake happened because Haiti had practiced voodoo and had made a deal with the devil. (I haven't heard his take on Chile.)

This type of thinking took place in the city of Richmond the other day when a few members from Westboro Baptist Church from Kansas visited claiming that bad things happen in America (i.e., soldiers killed in war) because of one's sexual orientation or simply because of the presence of our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Obviously Jesus believed then and most surely today that tragic events have nothing to do with guilt or innocence of the victims. (Jesus purity of life and the way he died should silence any such thinking.) As we all know, earthquakes kill saints and sinners as do suicide bombers. While sin can lead to tragedy – every tragedy is not the result of sin. Bad things befall good and bad people.

Jesus could not contain himself in the face of such ignorance and self-justification: *Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or those 18 people killed at Siloam were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? And to each, he replies with an emphatic "NO!"*

In the earthquakes I mentioned, we find many innocent and religious people who died in them. How do we, as believers in Christ, explain such tragedies? Writers, such as Peter Kreeft and C.S. Lewis believe that what is ultimately at stake is human freedom and God's respect for it. God gives us freedom and refuses to violate it, even when it would seem beneficial to do so. If this is so, then I say, "*Take my freedom!*"

Others believe that Jesus reveals God **not as one who rescues, but a God who redeems**. God does not protect us from pain, but instead **enters fully into it and redeems it**.

+A reading from the Book of Samuel came up in weekday Mass a day after the Haitian earthquake. In it we are told that the two sons of Eli carried into camp the Arc of the Covenant before a great day of battle. All of Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the whole earth resounded.

And yet despite this faith, Israel was defeated, and everyone fled, each to his own house. There was a great slaughter and thirty thousand of her foot-soldiers fell. The arc of the covenant was captured; and the two sons of Eli died.

Could we not substitute the same faith of the people of Haiti and Chile just prior to what happened to them? Churches filled with faith on Sunday were destroyed later in the earthquake and even an Archbishop was killed. And it leaves us asking, “*So where was God in all of this?*”

If we read on in the Book of Samuel, the author does not try to explain why this happened to his faithful believers. He simply continues to tell its story and eventually we see how God redeems a tragedy from which he didn't rescue its victims. It also makes clear that God was with the people of Israel, even as they were being routed.

If we flash to the time of Jesus, we should also recognize the fact that while Jesus walked this earth, tragedies still occurred, such as the accident of the water tower. Jesus could have lifted up one hand to hold up that tower. Instead, he speaks of it only after it happened.

It is like when Jesus' friend Lazarus dies and he allows three days to pass in his absence: Both Martha and Mary said, upon seeing Jesus, cried out: “*If you had been here, my brother would not have died!*” They were asking what we still do today, “*Where were you? Why didn't you prevent this?*” Both are asking the universal, timeless question about suffering and God's absence: “*Where is God when.....*”

Jesus does not answer Martha & Mary's question, but we are told that he wept at the news. Only after that does he raise Lazarus. He does so as a sign for us all of what he does in wake of every tragedy and the loss of innocent life – He raises it up and redeems it.

Yes, he raised Lazarus, but he knew there would come that day that Lazarus, despite his faith and innocence, would still have to die and Jesus would not be there to rescue him or raise him up 2nd time around. He did not come around again and say, “*Let's try that one more time Lazarus - come out of there again!*”

Well, that would not be entirely accurate, as Jesus was there a 2nd and final time, raising Lazarus into eternal life and rescuing him from eternal death. Jesus is showing us that not a single life or dream that died in Haiti & Chile or any tragedy that befall our loved ones will remain unredeemed and unanswered.

Often when we are faced with great tragedy, we see only through our tears of this finite and limited world (a world in which Jesus entered fully), missing what Jesus wants us to understand: beyond the limits of this world, is the eternal that surrounds and redeems it.

Sometimes the only answer to the question of suffering and evil is the one Jesus gave to Mary and Martha – **HE WEPT**. He entered into our limited humanity, our very helplessness, to be completely one with us in all things.

+No one, for example, can really say what it means to lose a loved one until you have experienced it yourself. And that is what Jesus did and continues to do – he becomes incarnate in our grief and sadness – and then he raises it up and redeems it.

Jesus is never absent and so we can be sure to know that in the end all will be well and our pain will someday be redeemed in God's embrace and all of our questions of why answered in that embrace.