

Genesis 11:-50

Last Sunday evening we listened to Stephen Fry arguing that if there really is a God, then he is capricious, indifferent to human suffering, un-interested in the plight of human beings. It seems to me, that there is no stronger argument against the existence of a loving God, than what we have seen in Japan in the last week.

If God is a loving God, and he is also an all-powerful God: then he has a lot of explaining to do. If God miraculously manages every miniscule incident in the history of the world – from the death of a lamb who's had its eyeballs eaten from inside by an aggressive parasite, to the horrific deaths of thousands of people in a tsunami, in what way are we left believing that God is a loving God?

If, in a second, God can click his fingers and cause this kind of disaster, then ... what is the point of wasting your life working for justice and fairness for people? If you want to do that as a Christian, really – why bother – when doing it by or for a God whose character seems so inconsistent, indifferent to suffering, immovable to the countless prayers offered to him in desperation as we speak?

And let's be clear – if we shy away from these questions, then whatever it is we believe about God is shallow, and insecure and disconnected from life in the real world. Why does God allow a natural disaster like the one in Japan to take place? Or, if God is all-powerful, omnipotent, we have to ask why he causes it to take place.

Because it seems to me, that if you must believe that God is all-powerful, then you are led into the kind of logic that many of us detest. Aids victims are dying because it's God's judgment. If something, no matter how good or bad happens to you, it is a just act of God. Either that, or you're led into the logic of: "Oh, it's alright, they're in heaven now – where everything is happy and sweet." But even there, heaven and earth are not so disconnected as we might want to think – and if this is how a loving God behaves, you might be forgiven for not wanting to spend eternity in his company.

So, it seems to me, we are driven back to the question of power. We've heard the quotation: Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. If you believe that – then is it not equally applicable to God? Is there any more blatant form of absolute power, than some God who is all powerful, Omni-potent as the Greeks would say. And is there any more blatant an abuse of that power than what we have witnessed in Japan this week?

I suppose the question I want to ask, is this: where does the Bible say that God is Omnipotent? Where does Scripture say that God is all-powerful. Sure, these are pagan beliefs about God. But in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, where – where do we read that God is Omnipotent. I know it's in some of our favourite hymns ... but is this belief to be found anywhere in Scripture?

We have been reading Genesis... Surely, if God created the world, then he must be all-powerful and omnipotent! He didn't just wind the world up and leave it to tick... On Sunday evenings in Lent, we are working our way through the entire bible ... and we are still in Genesis. Now the first 11 chapters of Genesis, follow a basic pattern: God creates the world; world falls into disarray because of human sin; Massive flood comes and wipes everyone out;

the slate is wiped clean; oh dear – human beings misbehaving again, building a tower of Babel.

Central in this is the story of the flood. And it is not only the Jewish scriptures that speak of this all-encompassing flood in the Ancient Near East. Many other documents and creation stories include stories of this great flood, which leads us to think there must have been one. And what happens in Scripture – God is portrayed as the cause of that flood. The reason? That the human heart is always, ever, only evil. Then after the flood, the rainbow... another covenant ... God promises never to do it again, why? His reason for not doing it again is the same reason he gave for doing it in the first place: the human heart is always, ever, only evil!

Now, the first covenant in Scripture, is that God will never send a flood again... but it happens – and it happened this week! So what does that tell you? Doesn't it suggest that God is not the cause of this? And doesn't the Genesis text actually force us to question whether, God actually caused the first one?

Power corrupts. But as the character of God unfolds amidst the human story, people are beginning to learn something of how God acts in the world. Sure, God created the world. But this is a world in which life is tough... and harsh ... and where disasters happen. And what Genesis begins to draw us towards is this: the belief made explicit in the New Testament that God's strength is made perfect in human weakness; of Jesus, telling people that its Gentiles who exert power over those they rule.

The God of Genesis – though he has created the world, is not micro-managing it, creating different laws of physics, biology and chemistry for every situation. Turn the kettle on, and it might freeze, depending on whether you've remembered to read your bible this morning! No ... this is a God who, despite the grand gestures of Genesis 1-11, makes himself vulnerable to human beings.

And so the story begins, of God choosing Abraham, and through Abraham, choosing a people. A people who are not powerful, because they are the descendents of an old man who couldn't have kids. A people who are not morally superior – because, the patriarchs are amongst the worst moral cowards of Scripture. Cheating, lying, conniving... but somehow, active in their relationship with God. In fact, in the Genesis story, the first good man that we get to is Joseph. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the celebrated patriarchs – but the first one in this line with any moral integrity and character is Joseph – and he doesn't have the heroic status of his predecessors.... What does that tell you?

First of all, even the people through whom God has chosen to reveal his character to the world, are a powerless, morally weak and ethically flawed bunch of people. This is not a God revealing himself from a position of power. This is a God who has created a universe, and who invests himself in the fallen, broken, suffering lives of the people he has created.

This is not an all-powerful Greek God, omnipotent, indifferent to the cry of human pain. This is a God who is vulnerable, whose power is demonstrated not in controlling the universe, but a power that surfaces most fully in the midst of vulnerability, and suffering and struggle and self-giving love.

Power, in the stories of Genesis, is being radically re-conceived. Power, is being immersed in a narrative that will continue to unfold right up to the Easter story. True power – is not power

from the dizzy heights of mount Olympus. But the weakness and vulnerability and uncertainty that unfolds in the pages of Scripture as in the human story.

If we want some developed theory about why God suspends his capacity to re-order the universe so as to exclude suffering, that Scripture is working towards – and it offers a very clear and particular way of involving human beings in that re-ordering of the universe. But we will not grasp that way by reading a Christian paperback, a wikipedia entry or a few paragraphs of clever philosophy. We can only grasp our way by losing ourselves in the story of Scripture ...

So, where does that leave victims of a horror that is being faced in Japan as we speak? All we can say is that, if the God of Scripture is alive in your, then can you allow the story of who you are today remain separate from the stories of those who are suffering in Japan at the moment?