



Prez Release

Slow to Speak and Quick to Listen February 2005

The tsunami in Southern Asia is one of those unplanned for occurrences in life that has left the entire world scrambling to help and make sense of such devastation. Both religious leaders and cynics about religious response to such tragedy are being called upon to make sense of the loss of life and property

What is so interesting is that those people who were tourists in the area have provided the majority of the “real-time” photographs of the devastations. While their record is helpful in giving us all a picture of the devastation, it is ironic that, while impacted in the short-term, these video-graphers could go home to relative safety. The full impact of destruction of family, livelihood and property was, is and will be borne by the local residents.

The attempts to make sense of this tragedy come naturally to all of us. Some perception is shallow and predictably cynical. Some is complex and miserable. I have found the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury very clear and worth repeating.

“Religious people have learned to look at other human faces with something of the amazement and silence that God himself draws out of them. They see the immeasurable value, the preciousness, of each life. And here is one of the paradoxes. The very thing that lies closest to the heart of a religious way of life in the world, the passion about the value of each and every life, the passion that makes religious people so obstinate and inconvenient when society discusses abortion and euthanasia—this is also just what makes human disaster so appalling, so much of a challenge to the feelings. Sometimes as secular moralist may say in contemporary debates: “Nature is wasteful of life; we can’t hold to absolute views of the value of every human organism.” That is not an option for the believer. That is why for the believer the uniqueness of every sufferer in a disaster such as the present one is so especially harrowing. There are no “spare” lives.

That is also why the reaction of faith is or should be always one of passionate engagement with the lives that are left, a response that asks not for understanding but

for ways of changing the situation in whatever—perhaps small—ways that are open to us. The odd thing is that those who are most deeply involved—both as sufferers and as helpers—are so often the ones who spend least energy in raging over the lack of explanation. They are likely to shrug off, awkwardly and not very articulately, the great philosophical or religious questions we might want to press. Somehow, they are most aware of two things: a kind of strength and vision just to go on; and a sense of the imperative for practical service and love. Somehow in all of this, God simply emerges for them as a faithful presence. Arguments “for and against” have to be put in the context of that awkward, stubborn persistence.

What can be said with authority about these terrible matters can finally be said only by those closest to the cost. The rest of us need to listen; and then to work and—as best we can manage it—pray.”

The wisdom of the Archbishop of Canterbury is really the counsel of St. James who tells us to be quick to hear and slow to speak (James 1:19). James does not give us such direction without there being a key result that follows. This is seen in verse 22: Prove yourself doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves. It is in these horrific events in life that we have the greatest opportunity to live out James’ suggestion. Listen to those most impacted by the tragedy—listen so you can hear—so that your activity in the name of Jesus Christ will find a connecting point—not a hollow ring of patronization nor a tinny bong of cynical philosophizing.

It is in that process that we might approximate the pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God—to visit orphans and widows in their distress—and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27).

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