

February 2010

To our neighbours near the church in Friston village and near where we individually live.

Dear neighbours,

Once again most of us have probably seen on our screens the massive scale of the disaster in Haiti and recall that it was on Boxing Day 2004 that the tsunami took away many thousands of lives. As the pictures are beamed into our homes we become aware that events like this happen with an alarming frequency. It is a reasonable question to ask why, if God is real as Christians believe, He allows such things.

The Lord Jesus Christ deals with this matter in principle in Luke 13. 1-5. It is recorded like this:-

*“There were present at that season some that told him (Jesus) of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”*

The first example was of savage political murder. The second of a disaster. The principle remains the same whatever the scale or however much or little there is of human responsibility. (Perhaps that wall was badly built; perhaps jerry-built buildings in an earthquake zone make matters worse.)

People used to think (and perhaps some still do) that if something exceptionally bad happens to someone it must be because there is something specially bad hidden away in their lives. Jesus denies that; and His comment on it is that everyone is a sinner in the sight of God, to a greater or lesser extent maybe, but all sinners none the less. So whether we are onlookers or simply hear of tragic events we are to take heed to ourselves lest events overtake us unawares.

Without repentance, we shall all likewise perish, Jesus says. “Likewise” does not mean with the same type of death but equally unexpectedly - finding us unprepared.

We know we must all die. But these sorts of events remind us that we must be prepared to die, for we know not what a day may bring (Proverbs 27.1).

We may have mistaken ideas about being prepared. We may say, “I’m not afraid to die” but may not have taken into consideration that after death is the judgment of God upon our lives. We may say to ourselves that if there is a judgment we shall make out a good case for the things we did with our lives. But, in God’s sight shall no man living be justified (Psalm 143.2).

Thousands of deaths happening virtually simultaneously in any sort of catastrophe are still thousands of individuals facing personal eternity. The hugeness of the scale does not alter the personal act of dying for each individual. Hence Jesus says “ye shall all likewise perish”. Even if we die a lonely death our death in any given moment will be contemporary with thousands of others.

So Jesus says "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish". Repentance before God is to express to Him sorrow for our sin and our resolve to be clear of it by making such changes to our lives as prove our earnestness.

The Bible teaches that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ achieved an atonement in the sight of God for each one who sees the truth of it and trusts Christ personally (seeing that He has been raised to life for evermore) confessing to the Saviour his sin and seeking the pardon of God. *"Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death"* (2 Corinthians 7.10).

Without such faith mankind's sorrow is unavailing, leaving bitterness in its trail and many other unrequited emotions. But the Saviour's promises of forgiveness and a perfect everlasting life after the probation of this present one more than make up for all life's tribulations, for those who believe.

In such catastrophes, then, however unwilling we may be to come to terms with them, God has a purpose. It is that we, who are so far spared, should be warned and take heed lest that which we in our measure deserve should happen to us suddenly and catch us by surprise.

Sometimes we speak of a living death or a living hell - meaning that life continues, but with horrendous suffering. We think of it as a worst scene scenario, but even of this Jesus says, "it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell (Mark 9.43)...and it is better for thee to enter halt (ie with an amputation) into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell" (Mark 9.45). The issue remains the same – we must not let the issues from death overtake us unawares.

*"God now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man (Jesus) whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead"* (Acts 17.30-31).

*"As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many"* (Hebrews 9. 27-28).

Yours sincerely,