

That's a great gospel! But I wish to reflect with you on the horrific events in Japan. There are two kinds of evil we live with. One could be called natural or physical, such as earthquakes, typhoons, and those illnesses that do not come from lifestyles. These are evils that can be lessened but not eliminated as long as we share bodily life in an imperfect or finite world. This kind of evil stalks us all the time. It lurks in our bodies or waits in the shudders of the ground.

And what do we say in comfort or hope? An old approach is to tell everyone, and presumably ourselves, to be prepared. Life IS uncertain. Heaven IS the final answer: salvation, completion, life beyond time and its turbulence. Life with God, home at last.

But there is another answer for right now. It is COMPASSION. This is the most God-like virtue, and the heart of Jesus' message, his ministry. And his teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is compassion expressed in deeds as far as possible. The Samaritan did not stand by the roadside and shake his head, saying "Too bad, but these things happen. It's a violent country." Nor can we imagine Jesus saying, "I would help you but you are not my own kind." Both the United States and China have fought wars with

Japan. No matter; we both move quickly to compassionate aid. Perhaps you expect me to say that good comes out of evil. St. Paul said that first. But it does not explain why such horrendous physical evil is allowed by the Creator in the first place.

I will consider that, but first, the eschatological answer – that Jesus promises a new creation, that God who made us once will make us again. This needs to be expressed more effectively. And believed more strongly. There are few people who go singing to their meeting with God, or who feel that longing for God which St Augustine assures us is at the very heart of our being. St Paul expressed this quandary when he wrote of the tension between wanting to be with Christ by dying, and yet wanting to do Christ's work, to be with Christ in another way by living.

One approach which bypasses faith is to think of all misfortune as the result of chance. It is Rabbi Harold Kushner's theory of a helpless God in a random universe. We know instinctively this is not the answer – a helpless God is not God. But how well do we convey the other answers?

One of my students, now an able scientist, in his youth lost both his parents to cancer. The cancer was not related to lifestyle. It was seemingly a cruel

and haphazard thing, an almost brutal singling out of two remarkable humans (with three growing children) and calling them to die painfully and die young. The son attributes all this to chance. It's your good fortune if you miss it. And many take this approach; the possibilities of tragedy are everywhere – on the highway, in the food, the airplane, in the MRI in the physician's hands. Or now, with the nuclear reactor.

But there is another way to confront the tragedies of life besides showing compassion (we who survive). It is the way of faith, of course, but also, the strong conviction that LIFE IS GIFT. Religion assures us this is true, and it is the reason so much of worship is praise and thanksgiving. But think about it—life IS a gift. We don't plan our existence and then get ourselves born. But it happens. Here we are – part of Being. All that is. We don't seem to draw this conclusion: if our very existence, our human life, is a shared gift from the Giver we call God, then we should accept it gratefully, no matter what happens.

But why are we born now, and not in an age before anesthesia and air travel, an earlier time when we would scream in pain and travel by oxcart?

Why are we born male or female, and to this particular family? Think what it was like to be a young man born at the turn of the last century, just in time for the battlefields of the first world war. Or in 1919, just old enough to die on the same battlefields. Listen to this letter flown out of Stalingrad from a young German soldier who knows he is doomed. He wrote to his father, a Lutheran pastor, and says: "What I am going to say will cause you pain but I must be honest. I have seen such terrible things I can no longer believe in God." Back home, he said, in church with the hymns and all that, it was possible. But not in Stalingrad.¹ Was his life also a gift? Yes. But God has much to make up to him.

Wars are of human making. But the earthquake, the ~~p~~^tsunami, were of God's making. How can we justify God? In ~~Pittsburgh last week~~ my friend's 13-year-old daughter asked me that. The answer is not to blame it all on Adam's sin, that's old theology. I don't know how much Catherine absorbed of what I tell you now, but listen: **God is infinite. Total, all encompassing reality. And necessarily one of a kind. The infinite has no imperfections. We do, because we are finite. Look: we are marvelously made, our bodies, our minds. And the earth is wonderful. But neither we nor the planet can be infinite, perfect, without flaw.**

The healthiest body breaks down and eventually dies. The earth is our homeland, God's gift to us. But the tectonic plates can shift.

And so? Why believe in God, with such pain in life? Here is an answer that attempts to read the mind of God. It is as if the Creator said,

*Because earth and humans are imperfect, I will join them.
As a human I will share their suffering.*

*That became true in Jesus, the Incarnation.
But there is more, God speaking:*

*I will overcome the last and greatest of their evils, which is death.
And he did, that's resurrection.*

*And then, I will join them to myself, I will begin a new creation.
I will do all this because I love them.*

We should accept the gift of life gladly, even joyfully, and return it when the time comes. And one thing more, which is everything: trust in the Eternal Love. Think as well as pray on these things. The truth is enlightenment, and we need to live in more of the light.