

Doing Mission in the Light of Disaster: Reading Jeremiah and thinking about the *tsunami*



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Abstract: *Can we and should we as Christians have an insiders view on disasters such as the Asian Tsunami? As Christians we sometimes talk of having a distinctive voice but what does that mean, what can we say that is different? Reflecting on the prophet Jeremiah, Jonathan Ingleby poses the question – Have we, or are we, missing something?*

To a surprising degree Jeremiah is a prophet to the nations. You might have thought that he had enough on his hands dealing with the intrigues of the court at Jerusalem. In fact he had his eye very firmly on international events. In chapter 25 he takes the cup of Yahweh's anger and makes 'all the nations to whom the Lord sent me' drink it. The list begins with Jerusalem and the towns of Judah but includes the peoples round about (see the detailed list in verses 19-26) ending up with Babylon itself. He constantly addresses what we would call 'the news'. He has influence in high places and is determined to use it. Kings, captains, nobles, priests, fellow prophets, none are exempt. In chapter 29 we read of a letter that Jeremiah sent to the elders among the exiles in Babylon further commenting on the political situation. Communications with the community in Babylon may well have been difficult, but Jeremiah takes advantage of the royal mail! In all this he would have claimed, no doubt, that he was only doing his job. 'I appoint you, says Yahweh 'over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant' (1:10). Appropriate enough words, one might feel, as a text to go with what we see day by day on our television screens in Sri Lanka and Thailand and Indonesia.

So much for Jeremiah, but what about us? A disaster of the magnitude we have just witnessed raises very acute questions about our ability or inability to comment effectively on world events. *Can we have a distinctive voice? Should we have a distinctive voice? Even if we can say something distinctive how can we be sure that it will be heard?*

One way of rephrasing the first question – can we have a distinctive voice? – might be 'Do we know anything which others do not know because we have an "insider view" of the situation?' Consider, for example, the Old Testament prophets whose reliability was tested by their admission to 'the council of Yahweh' (Jeremiah 23:18-22). Jeremiah expected them to be 'inside traders' when it came to the truth, and that included the truth about world politics. So, once again, what about us? Did we have, for example, advance warning of the catastrophe on Boxing Day 2004? Once it had struck, did we know better than others, how we should act? By contrast Jeremiah, both before and after the catastrophe that engulfed his people at the time of the Babylonian invasion, was able to give very precise instructions. Equally do we know anything about the *meaning* of the event? But it was precisely for the meaning of what had happened that people so often approached the OT prophets.

Apparently we are in a radically different situation today. The prophetic ministry – in the narrow sense of those who foretell the future – seems entirely absent, even discredited. It is not just that nobody foresaw the earthquake that produced the devastation, but even if they had, would anyone, believer or non-believer alike, have listened?

What about the wider sense of prophecy – ‘if you go on like this it will lead to disaster’. We may feel that this is a little more relevant to our present situation, but here we seem no better off than other concerned non-Christian observers. We look back, like others, for signs that the disaster could have been averted or at least controlled by better, more ethical, more prudent behaviour both before and during the event. Perhaps people were negligent or self-preserving in failing to give adequate warnings. Or perhaps people were too slow in helping. Identifying these people and condemning them, however, does not seem a particularly Christian approach, indeed we may feel that it is more Christian not to play ‘the blame game’ if everybody else is already at it.

As for the question of victim blame – this happened to these people because they behaved in a particular (culpable) way – we will (rightly) have nothing to do with it., particularly if this approach implies that the judgement of God is part of the explanation. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place there are too many victims who are obviously *innocent*. Secondly, we are simply not sure how God acts in judgement in the world today. Jesus pointed out to his disciples on a couple of occasions that they were making wrong assumptions about God’s judgement (John 9:1-3, Luke 13:1-5). I expect it goes further than this. We do not believe that God acts in this way at all. We can accommodate a sort of ‘what someone sows, they will also reap’ approach, but this does not help us in the least when it comes to children swept away in a *tsunami*.

I am not here getting into theodicy again. I am attempting to play ‘practical politics’. In the task of mission, as Christian people have we any better ‘equipment’ (advance warning, special insights into present realities, superior understanding of likely outcomes) than anyone else?

Of course it may all come down to the work of the Holy Spirit in empowering us to be more patient, more loving, more joyful, and so on, in the work God has called us to, for example in responding to the huge demands that being involved in a crisis ministry will make on us. I am not at all trying to belittle that empowerment, indeed I think the fruits of the Spirit are what matter most. But I am suggesting that the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, promises something more. Reading Jeremiah makes me feel that we have missed out.

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