

Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O M I
Speaker, Columnist and Author

Website: <http://www.ronrolheiser.com/>

Haiti and the Theodicy Question

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Where is God in the countless tragedies that happen in our world? Where is God when bad things happen to good people? Where was God during the Holocaust?

These are timeless questions and, taken together, constitute what is often called the theodicy question, the question of God and human suffering.

Every so often this question hits us with a particular poignancy, as it did last week with the earthquake in Haiti. Somewhere between a quarter of a million and half a million people are dead, thousands are injured, hundreds of thousands are homeless, thousands more now face the possibility of disease from lack of proper water, food, housing, and hygiene, its capital city has been almost completely destroyed, and virtually everyone in the country has lost loved ones. And all of this happened to one of the poorest nations in the world - and to a people who have a deep faith in God.

Where is God in all this? How does one find a faith perspective within which to understand this? Not easily.

When we search scripture for answers, we find that neither the Jewish scriptures nor Jesus try to tackle the question philosophically, namely, in the type of way that Christian and Jewish apologetic writers have tried to answer it. Scripture and Jesus, instead, do two things: First, they place suffering and tragedy into a larger perspective within which God is understood more as redeeming suffering rather than as rescuing us from it. Second, they assure us that God is with us, a fellow-sufferer, in any tragedy.

For example, anyone who follows the daily readings for the church's liturgy, cannot not have noticed, that on the very day after the earthquake, there was a haunting parallel between what happened in Haiti and what was described in that day's Epistle taken from the Book of Samuel. Here is an excerpt from the Epistle for the liturgy the day after the earthquake:

So the people went to Shiloh, and brought with them the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the Ark of the Covenant. When the ark of the covenant of the Lord was brought into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the whole earth resounded. ... [And with that faith and confidence, Israel marched into battle, but] ... Israel was defeated, and everyone fled, each to his own house. There was a great slaughter and thirty thousand of her foot-soldiers fell. The ark of the covenant was captured; and the two sons of Eli died.

One doesn't have to strain the imagination to write a haunting parallel:

So the people Haiti practiced their Christian faith with piety and confidence. They went to their churches, received the Eucharist, and lit vigil candles to their God. And they trusted that their God would protect them. But there came a great earthquake. Hundreds of thousands of its people died, its great buildings were all leveled, all its churches were destroyed, its beloved cathedral fell to the ground, and the Archbishop was killed.

So where was God in all of this?

The Book of Samuel doesn't try to write an apologetics to explain what happened that day when a people who had just celebrated its faith and confidence in God were utterly crushed in battle. It doesn't try to explain where God was when this happened. It simply continues to tell its story and, eventually, we see how God redeems a tragedy from which he didn't rescue its victims. It also makes clear that God was with the people of Israel, even as they were being routed.

Jesus gives us essentially the same perspective: When his friend, Lazarus, lay dying, he didn't rush to his side to rescue him. He waited until Lazarus was dead and only then went to his home. He was met there by the sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, who each asked him the painful question: Where were you when our brother was dying? Why didn't you come and cure him?

Jesus, for his part, doesn't meet their question head-on. Instead he simply asks: "Where have you put him?" They answer: "Come, we'll show you!" They take him to the grave and when Jesus sees the tomb and drinks in their grief, he sits down and begins to cry. He enters and shares their grief. Only afterwards does he raise up the body of his dead friend.

Where was God when the earthquake hit Haiti?

He was weeping with its people, grieving outside its mass graves, sitting in sadness beside its collapsed buildings. He was there, though he provided no Hollywood or Superman-type rescue. Moreover we can be sure he will redeem what was lost. In God's time, eventually, not a single life or single dream that died in Haiti will remain unredeemed. In the end, all will be well and all will be well and every manner of being will be well.

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