



In the Face of Disaster

Dr Nigel Cameron preached this sermon in Holyrood Abbey Church, Edinburgh, on Sunday 8th March, 1987, two days after the sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* off Zeebrugge. Only minor changes have been made to its original spoken form.

Readings: Job 1, Luke 13:1-5

As I indicated this morning, it seemed appropriate to change the theme on which I had intended to speak this evening in the light of the disaster at sea, about which we have heard so much and which must, inevitably, have raised many questions in all of our minds. Of course, this is no isolated disaster: it is an example of the kind of public tragedies which have always dominated the news media, the kind of tragedy which becomes a tragedy for the world now that the world can hear about it. But, of course, neither is that kind of public tragedy to be isolated from the tragic character of our human experience as a whole, because, for every hundred, every thousand, people caught up in disasters like that, in crashes and earthquakes and famines, there are tragedies of no lesser dimensions in the lives of each of us; tragedies which carry the same sting, which force us to ask questions about the significance of these things; tragedies which can devastate the lives of individuals, and which, to those round about, to those who know, those who feel alongside them, are matters of no less moment than this great, national, public disaster which has so gripped the imagination of the nation. And so, I take it up as an example of something which is not uncommon in the public world at large, something which is not uncommon in our own private worlds. How are we to understand such a thing? What do we, as Christians, have to say about it? Is there anything we can say for ourselves, for others, which will perhaps still our hearts, or which will at least determine how we are to think when we are confronted with such a thing? So I ask.

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There is an immediate, natural reaction in all of us, and, I think, in every man, both to public tragedies and private, and this is *to seek a message in them*. What is the meaning of this, in the sense of *What message does this carry for me?* How am I to read this event? Is there, if you like to put it in Christian terms, is there a word here for me or for us all? And I think it's an instinctive reaction to such an event, whether a public or a private tragedy; we seek a meaning, as if, somehow, there were a code to be broken, or a box to be unlocked, which would reveal a statement to us of some kind. Now, that, I think, is a natural reaction; I don't think it is a distinctively religious

reaction: I think it is the way we respond to being pulled up short by events of this kind. Now, there are many examples of that: we have examples here in the book of Job, among Job's friends who spend many chapters seeking precisely to determine and define a meaning in what has happened to Job, and that is a story many of you will know well. Page after page, Job's friends, Job's 'comforters' as they are called, come to him and seek to help him unlock the mystery and tell him why this thing has happened, and why his world has fallen apart. That was what the Jews of his day sought to do.

It is evidently also what the Jews of Jesus' day sought to do, as we read in these verses in Luke 13. There are other occasions when similar things are under discussion: when they bring to him a man born blind and the question is asked, Did this man sin or his parents? They seek a significance, an individual message in his being blind; and here, they come and they tell Jesus of these Galileans whose blood Pilate has mingled with their sacrifices, plainly one of the many occasions on which blood was spilt as the Romans and the Jews came into conflict. And Jesus answers, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse than other Galileans?' The implication is that he believes they do think that; this is the common view of the day, that, if some particular disaster strikes, that is the meaning to be read out of it: disaster comes to these men because they are worse sinners than others. And he goes on to give his own example, the tower in Siloam: again, apparently a well-known occasion in the recent past, a tower in the Siloam area of Jerusalem has collapsed and killed eighteen people. He asks 'Do you think they were worse offenders than the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?' Is that the way in which we are to understand such an event? Or to give a third example, I think perhaps the most touching of all the stories to emerge in the last forty-eight hours, one which you may well yourself have heard or seen: the story of a little girl who, in fact, survived this tragedy and who was heard by another passenger on the boat to say that she thought that she was going to die; and why was she going to die? She hadn't done bad things: she hadn't told lies; why should she die? That seems to me to be exactly the same as what these Jews and what Job's 'comforters' were trying to do: to seek to read a particular significance out of disaster. It is a natural, human thing to try to do.

Now, I think that one of the things the Bible says to us over and over again is that *this is not the kind of thing we should try to do*; but to that we shall return, because this particular question of disaster, and how we are to read it,

is part of a much larger question; and, although it is at something of a tangent, I think we must speak about the larger question before we come back to this narrower version of it: because, of course, you cannot separate disaster from triumph, and you cannot separate either disaster or triumph from the humdrum of events which lie between the one and the other. And at the bottom of the question about disaster, or the question about triumph, and whether we can read a meaning out of it, is the question about the whole of our experience: whether we can read meaning out of our experience in general. What are we to make of *every* event that we go through, *every* story we could tell or that we hear?

Now, let me define this rather more carefully, because I am not asking the question whether history, in the sense of the history of the world or the history of the nation, or in the sense of your history and my history - I am not asking the question whether history has a meaning, because of course it has a meaning, and that is the significance of our believing in the Providence of God. The Providence of God is another way of saying the meaning of history; it is because we believe in a providential God, who is the ruler of the world, who is sovereign over all things, that there is a meaning implicit in every history: in the history of nations, in the history of men. And I think we can go on, therefore, to say that there will come a time, and the time when it comes will be the end of time, when the meaning of history, the history of the nations, the history of you and of me, will be able to be read; when the key to the interpretation of our histories will come from the hand of God. That is something we believe, that these things have a meaning, a purpose, a function, and that they all move toward the final end of all things, when God will unravel the mystery, the books will be opened and the interpretation will be given. But I am not asking that question, whether things have a meaning, finally, in the purpose of God, in the eschatological winding up of all things. What I am asking is the question *whether we can now rightly discern such meaning* in our own lives or in the history of the nations.

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Now, there are different views on this question, and I don't expect what I'm going to say to be entirely agreeable to us all. According to Scripture, the one who is able to interpret history, whether personal history or national history, is the one in the office of prophet, and the very fact that you have to be a prophet to give this kind of interpretation suggests that it is not for everybody. It is interesting that amongst the Jews, the historical books, as we call them, are also referred to as prophetic books, because what they do, of course, is to give the *interpretation* of the history of the nation from God's vantage point. Now, there are different views as to whether prophecy today is possible or actual, and I think there are some senses in which it is plainly both. There are

others in which, I think, we must be more cautious, but I am prepared to agree that, in principle, yes, we may have prophets, and prophets have power to interpret what is going on. But, again, to say that is to imply that others do not. And it seems to me that many Christians are far too ready to give an interpretation of history, whether the history of the nations or their own history, the history of the events in which they are themselves bound up. Now, that needs to be qualified with care, because I am not suggesting - how could I? - that there is no significance apparent to us in what we do, what we are called to do. I am not suggesting that the Lord does not give us instruction, that there are not exceptional moments in which we are called into a ministry or some other vocation, or in which we receive indelible, personal evidence of a word from God, interpreting some event for us: that is undeniable. What I am suggesting is that we have no reason to believe that we can *generally* read the significance of events round about us, and particularly not (and here we come back to the subject with which we began) that we can read the significance of events on the ground of *whether or not they are a success*, so that we could say that, if something is a disaster, it is the judgement of God, it is an evidence of its being evil and wrong; and if something is a triumph, it is an evidence of the goodness of God, of his blessing and of its being right. Now, there are many Christians who, without first thinking through the implications of what they are doing, would give just that kind of assessment of events round about them.

Take two examples: take the case of an individual who meets some kind of a personal disaster, let us say, somebody called into ministry or exercising ministry who, through illness or accident, is unable to continue his vocation and the exercise of his gifts. There are those who would say that he must never have been intended so to do, that plainly it can never have been the purpose of God for him. Or, to give another example, What of a Christian organization with financial difficulties? There are those who would say, 'if this work is not receiving enough funding, it is a question whether this work is of God'. That is an institutional example. The criterion of judgement is that, if something is a success or someone is a success, then we can determine that God is behind them and this is right; and, if something is a failure or perhaps is threatened by failure, we can somehow determine that God is against it or is against him, and something is wrong.

Now, I would hope that even to state that argument would be to show how ill-founded it is as a Christian argument, because, of course, in the case of the man or in the case of the institution, there may be good reasons for us to say, 'he should never have gone into this ministry' or 'this institution is not a good idea and should be wound up', but I do not believe that these arguments will have any relation to whether or not the man or the institution is in fact a success. The idea of the Jews of Jesus' day that because these men were killed they must have been worse sinners than other men; the idea of Job's 'comforters' that there must be some very simple explanation for this man's suffering; the idea that, if something dreadful happens to you, it's because you've done something, is a very common idea; but it is not a Christian idea, it is not a Jewish idea, it has no foundation in Holy Scripture: it is on the one hand, I think, part of the natural religion of the world. As

a religious idea, it is something which I think you will find in different ways in Islam, in Hinduism and in some of the other non-Christian religions: the idea that whatever happens is right and good, and this is the will of Allah, that you can read the purposes of God out of failure and success in the most simple and straightforward fashion.

The idea that, if something dreadful happens to you, it's because you've done something, is a very common idea; but it is not a Christian idea.

The most dramatic Christian example of this kind of thinking, and some of you will know about this, is in a number of movements in the United States and elsewhere, which have had an influence in this country, which we may refer to as 'success' theology: if you are doing what is right, not only will you be healthy, but you will also be wealthy - and, perhaps, wise as well! If you find yourself ill or in financial difficulty, it's because you haven't been standing in the Lord's will. This has had considerable success among Christians in other parts of the world, and with some in our own; and I've had people say to me that they have been ill or they have had some kind of hardship, and friends have said to them, 'plainly, you've done something wrong; what is it?' Friends who obviously haven't read the book of Job!

Yet there are those who argue that this is a coherent, consistent approach to Christian living, that, if you do what is right, you will be well and wealthy. That may be a position none of us would wish to defend, but there are elements of it in a lot of our Christian thinking which it has simply taken on and developed into a full-orbed system; the notion that, somehow, if something works, God is behind it, and if it doesn't work, he can't have been. Not only is there not, I think, biblical support for it, but it seems to me to be almost the opposite of what the Bible says; and that is why this kind of thinking is so pernicious. Some of you will know this hymn:

*Thrice blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field,
When he is most invisible.*

And you know how it goes on:

*Then learn to scorn the praise of men
And learn to lose with God,
For Jesus won the world through shame
And beckons thee his road.*

Learn to lose with God: that seems to me to express a strikingly contrasting idea of success and failure to that which many Christians seem to have.

So, how are we to approach the subject of success and disaster? First of all, we have consciously to lay aside the inclination which, perhaps, all of us have, to read success as the blessing of God, and failure as his curse. There are occasions on which, of course, success is the fruit of the

blessing of God, and failure the fruit of his curse. But there are other occasions on which success is the evidence of something else, and on which failure itself is the mark of God's blessing. The point is that we have to make our assessment, our judgement, *on other grounds than whether it works or it doesn't*. There may be good reasons why the young man should not have gone into the ministry - perhaps we discover that he was living a double life. Or it may be of an institution, that there are good arguments why it is a bad thing. And if we are convinced of these good arguments, and we then see it failing, we can rejoice. But it could equally well have been the case that something which had the blessing of God and which had, in his own good purposes, a glorious future, could through sin and failure and the action of the evil one, come to nought. And the history of the world, the history of the church, is littered with examples of that kind; and it is only if we fall into this trap, which it seems to me the Muslims have fallen into when they are thinking about the sovereignty of God, this trap of viewing the purposes of God as worked out in history in a simplistic fashion; it's only if we fall into that trap that we are prevented from seeing the sophistication required if we are to discern the hand of God, in the history of the world and in the history of our own worlds.

We have consciously to lay aside the inclination . . . to read success as the blessing of God, and failure as his curse.

We go on to illustrate and support this with reference to the two Scripture passages with which we began, and with particular reference to disaster. I think that these two passages, Job 1 and the beginning of Luke 13, suggest to us two different ways of understanding disaster: I don't think that they are simply ways of understanding different disasters, although they are that; I think that they give us principles which overlay one another, and provide us with two distinct, but complementary, ways of coming to grips with things that go wrong. And we can begin with the way in which Jesus himself approaches the issue of accidental death in Galilee and Jerusalem. What does he say? He says, No, it wasn't that they sinned more than anybody else, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. That is to say, these signal disasters, in which the lives of men and women were taken dramatically and memorably, are a standing witness to human mortality and to the fact of the judgement of God. Of course, all human mortality is the outworking of the judgement of God: we die because we sin, and because sin brings, in its train, death. These signally disastrous occasions, in which men and women die before their time, are a dramatic reminder that we are mortal and, therefore, accountable, in a world - his world and our world - in which men and women live in the make-believe realm of immortality. Our Lord declares that these examples of disaster and death should lead his hearers to consider their own position. They too are mortal. The fact that one day they will die and that they are accountable to God is starkly illustrated in these events.

Secondly, we turn to Job. Now Job is a complicated book and there is an enormous amount one could say about this

chapter, in which we have Satan appearing before God. God himself holds up Job as an example of a blameless man, a godly man, and Satan taunts God and says, 'Does Job fear God for nought?': it is because everything is going well with him that Job is righteous and pious. Let us strip away some of this blessing and see what remains of his faith. And the Lord says, 'Go ahead'. Then we read the harrowing account of these disasters piled one upon the other, as Job's security in this world falls away and he is left alone. Yet he remains faithful. Of course, the story continues: he is then afflicted by disease, and is still found faithful, and he must then endure the torments of 'comfort' from his Christian friends.

Now, the purpose of that story is to say this, apart from anything else. A second level of understanding is that these disasters and tragedy are the evil one's attempt to entrap us in doubt, to deny our faith, to cause us to abandon our trust in God, because we feel we cannot honestly believe in a God of goodness, the God in whom we have trusted, in the face of our experience. In the imagery of this chapter, God is saying to Satan, 'Yes, go on, strip away their ground of confidence in me in the world, and see whether they really believe'. So in the cameo of the life of this man and his family in these disastrous circumstances we have a symbol for thousands of years of human history, for the sum total of human disaster, and for the faith of everyman who trusts in God and who will declare with Job, in the face of disaster, 'The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.'

So, on the one level, we have death, disaster, tragedy; all that makes for tragedy in the world, as a warning to man of mortality, of the frailty of human existence, of its lack of security, and the need to find security elsewhere; and, on the other hand, as God's purposed demonstration of the faithfulness of his people in the midst of the worst that sin and death and the devil himself can do to them.

Now, what I am not saying, emphatically what I am not saying, is that in the face of death and tragedy and disaster and all of these awful things which characterise human existence, the believer is caused to be somehow cauterised, to be protected, to be encapsulated, so that disasters don't touch him. There are some who say - and it is a great tragedy that this attitude persists among Christian people - they say, 'Well, it is the Lord's will that these things happen; we are to praise him still, we will rejoice in this kind of tribulation', and they do so airily to demonstrate that they are untouched by the awful character of the fallen world in which they live.

We are called not to pretend that these things do not matter, that disaster does not hurt, that tragedy is not real: we are called rather to weep with those who weep, to be in the forefront of the mourning.

real: we are called rather to weep with those who weep, to be in the forefront of the mourning. For the humanist, for the secularist, the death of another 130 people is the sort of thing that happens every day in a world like this; for us, this is sin working itself out, causing death and disaster in God's world and seeking to destroy those who bear his image. For us, it is a tragedy, and everyman's death is a greater disaster by far than it could ever be for the man outside of the church; and I have (this may be my failing) no understanding of Christians who pretend that disasters do not hurt them. It seems to me to be a different religion in which they believe, quite out of sympathy with the realism and humanity of the religion of the Scriptures. You read the Book of Job, and what you read is the story of believers like these people who seem to live in a world separate from the real world, coming and speaking to a man who is at the very heart of reality, and the heart of God's purposes, and throwing at him their facile interpretations. And Job sits and suffers and believes. And you see, Job is not an isolated example.

Job is not an isolated example, of one man for whom everything went wrong and who came to this view; the Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord. Job stands in the authentic, Biblical tradition, Job is the man whose religion is the religion of the Scriptures; because, what must be the most striking and prominent theme throughout these long chapters of Old Testament history, is not a naive attempt to read success as the will of God, and failure as, somehow, his displeasure. It is rather the cry, 'Why do the wicked prosper?'. 'How long, O Lord, how long?' It is the cry of those who are learning to lose with God; that is the cry of the people of God in Old Testament times, and it is the cry of the people of God in the New Testament, too, because, of course, it is the cry of Jesus Christ. 'Cursed is everyone who hangs upon a tree.' 'Learn to lose with God, for Jesus won the world through shame and beckons thee his road.'

We do not believe that we have prophetic power to read out significance in the face of disaster. Scripture enjoins us to weep and to mourn, not because we have no hope, but - because we *do* have hope - we alone are freed to mourn, we need make no pretence, for we believe in the God who raises the dead. 'Why do the wicked prosper?', 'How long, O Lord, how long?'. One day he will return to answer his people's cry, to unravel the threads, unlock the mysteries and give us the answers we want today but can't have. Until then, we must be content to remember our mortality, as we stand as God's men and women, the integrity of our faith maintained in the face of tragedy and suffering. And as we weep and mourn, we shall find what Job found: not an *answer* from God, but *God himself* given to us, his own answer, God himself in the midst of tragedy, in the midst of answerless, insoluble tragedy, God himself given to us in the dying of Jesus Christ with the hope of the resurrection; God himself, the answers to our prayers. Amen.

That seems to me to be a travesty of faith in Jesus Christ. We are called not to pretend that these things do not matter, that disaster does not hurt, that tragedy is not