

After the Recent Tsunami....

A Life-Changing Experience

A Personal Reflection on the Recent Tsunami Disaster
by GILBERT LAU

*“Blessed are they who mourn;
for they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5: 4*

On New Year's Eve, I left for the Thai island resort of Phuket, as a member of the initial Singapore disaster victim identification (DVI) team formed in the aftermath of the recent tsunami of 26 December, 2004. My task, as a forensic pathologist, was to examine some of the thousands of decomposed bodies of the deceased victims for clues which might lead to their eventual positive identification. We were assigned to a disaster site in Khao Lak, north of Phuket, where we worked under exceptional physical conditions.

The destruction was focal (Phuket was actually largely intact), but severe where it occurred. Whole buildings were destroyed and numerous motor vehicles were crushed. Personally, two scenes epitomised the sheer magnitude of the tsunami when it crashed upon the shores of Khao Lak. One was that of a fair-sized marine police patrol craft which had been washed at least half a kilometre inland from the shoreline and came to rest at the edge of a rainforest. The other was the sight of a series of previously free-standing chalets at an all but completely devastated beach resort that had, quite literally, been uprooted and either lay on their sides, or were completely overturned. The latter brought to mind the biblical injunction on the importance of being firmly rooted in the Lord, the very ground of our being:

“Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock. When the rainy season set in, the torrents came and the winds blew and buffeted his house. It did not collapse; it had been solidly set on rock. Anyone who hears my words but does not put them into practice is like the foolish man who built his house on sandy ground. The rains fell, the torrents came, the winds blew and lashed against his house. It collapsed under all this and was completely ruined.” Matt 7: 24 – 27

It also reminded me of a relatively recent incident, involving the localised, structural failure of a massive civil engineering project which, tragic as it was, had claimed a limited number of lives in Singapore. In a somewhat mysterious way, it awakened a growing awareness of my own foolishness in having built my self-serving dreams of success upon the sandy and unstable foundations of worldly illusions about which Thomas Merton had precisely the right words to say:

“Secular life is a life of vain hopes imprisoned in the illusion of newness and change, an illusion which brings us constantly back to the same old point, the contemplation of our own nothingness. Secular life is a



The author (at left) conversing with a visiting New Zealand deputy commissioner in a field mortuary

life frantically dedicated to escape, through novelty and variety, from the fear of death. But the more we cherish secular hopes, the more they disappoint us. And the more they disappoint us, the more desperately do we return to the attack and forge new hopes more extravagant than the last. These too let us down. And we revert to that insufferable condition from which we have vainly tried to escape.” (The Inner Experience – Notes on Contemplation)

During my brief, but exhausting, overseas stint, I beheld death with a particular poignancy and intimacy such as I never had in the past. To be sure, there was much physical destruction, carnage and massive loss of lives. Indeed, the very attempt to identify thousands of deceased persons from all over the world (which conferred a truly macabre, cosmopolitan flavour on this natural disaster) in just one of the affected countries, would itself have been quite unprecedented in the international history of DVI. It may well be assumed that the vast majority of the deceased were innocent victims of a natural calamity which took practically everyone by surprise and destroyed the property and livelihood of, probably, at least as many survivors.

Many have since asked, with obvious and understandable indignation, agitation or cynicism, “Where was God when this happened?” I can only say from my own limited experience, at my present stage of the sinuous journey of life, that God, the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, the God who Christians believe (or profess to believe) loved all humanity quite literally unto death and resurrection, is one who can and does make good come out of evil. I do not say that suffering and death, especially seemingly undeserved suffering and death, are good in themselves. But I have no doubt that good can arise from the very rubble of what appears to be horrific and unmitigated evil. Our God is, indeed, an ineffable God. Our God is utter mystery and his ways are totally mysterious, at least at the material time.

In the midst of such overwhelming devastation, I witnessed an immense and spontaneous outpouring of human generosity and goodwill. There was no shortage of volunteers who were evidently unrelated to the victims, massive donations of cash, supplies and equipment materialised in a short time and seemingly endless offers of aid abound. The multifarious acts of human kindness, expressed in the unmistakable eagerness, dedication and commitment of so many who were involved in the humanitarian relief efforts, extended even to the identification of the dead and their proper disposal.



Left:
A patrol craft washed inland
by the sheer force of the
tsunami



Right:
Scenes of localised
devastation caused by the
tsunami

Consequently, by participating in the DVI process, I was pleasantly rewarded, as it were, by a personal experience of the numinous in myriad practical ways. All this has only served to restore my faith in the essential goodness of humanity. In an altogether mysterious way, it has confirmed my growing awareness that, in life, what really matters is the seemingly small, often unnoticed and frequently neglected acts of kindness, as well as a fundamental openness to the truth about ourselves. In contemplative terms, it might be said that the ego must diminish and, in its place, silence, stillness and simplicity increase.

While the recent tsunami disaster has unequivocally emphasised the brevity of human life and the precariousness of human existence in a most stark manner, it has also taught me the importance of living my life a day at a time, a moment at a time. At long last, what had, for a long time, resided in the remote recesses of my mind, has finally begun to take root in my heart. Before I embarked on this journey, I intuited that it would be a life-changing experience for me. I was not disappointed, for it has been precisely that much more. In a way that I cannot quite understand, it has been both a purgative and illuminating experience by means of which I am beginning to grasp the meaning of the second beatitude. Mourning, or weeping, does have its place in life and those who mourn and weep will, indeed, be comforted and enjoy the deep and abiding peace which only Christ can bestow on those who receive him into their hearts. I now pray for the gift of tears, tears of both joy and sorrow that are prompted by the inner stirring of the Holy Spirit. For these are tears of liberation from the false self and the inestimable devastation which it wreaks upon our human nature. When these tears do come, in God's time (as with everything else), they will be immensely cathartic, both emotionally and spiritually.

I am finally beginning to realise what it means to "trust in the Lord", an oft brandished religious platitude. But it remains a

platitude only if we allow it to. For a variety of reasons, the past five years have been a particularly difficult time in my life. For a long time, I felt as if God had unjustly been holding me in abeyance, denying me the satisfaction of success, as I had conceived and desired it. I now know that much of this resentment was really unfounded for, in God's time, I have been blessed with the sure knowledge of his presence in my life and his profound love for me. I have encountered him in the midst of suffering, death and disaster, and have allowed him to enwrap me in his warm embrace. I now see that joy and peace, pain and sorrow, success and failure, suffering in all its forms, even death, must be embraced wholeheartedly and without reserve, if I am to live fully. Providentially (it simply could not have been otherwise), over that same period of time and up to the present, I have been using a bookmark which bears a quotation from the Book of Proverbs. It runs thus:

*"Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
And he shall make your paths straight."* Prov 3: 5, 6

In all this, I take inspiration from a prayer composed by (or, at least, attributed to) the late John Henry Cardinal Newman, the author of the classic *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and a leading 19th century Catholic theologian. By God's grace, I have adopted it as my own. Please permit me to share it with you as I conclude my reflection on the aftermath of the tsunami.

*"Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom;
Lead thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home;
Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet, I do not ask to see the distant scene;
One step enough for me."*

John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801 – 90)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Gilbert (centre) in discussion with an UN official at a DVI site

