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Disaster and Disorder: The Human Predicament

Peter Cotterell

**The C R Batten Lecture given at the London Baptist Preachers'
Association on 27 October 1989.**

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INTRODUCTORY

Between the two apparent boundaries of life—birth and death—it is impossible to make sense out of life. Between those two boundaries life appears to be meaningless. Bad things happen to good people. Bad people flourish, and it is simply not the case that eventually they get what they deserve. People lie and cheat and swindle, and bring despair, and yet they prosper. On the other hand people struggle, and work, and they are honest people of the highest integrity, and yet everything seems to go wrong for them.

Of course not everyone experiences the apparent meaninglessness of life in quite these stark terms. For most people life generally makes sense, but always, somewhere, there is the experience of gross unfairness, the accident, the bereavement, the illness, unemployment, old age, deception, a cunning fraud, and there it is—that meaninglessness that causes us to cry out from deep down inside us: 'It's not fair!'

Back in 1981 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that most moving book with the artless title, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The book had its origins in his personal experience. His son was afflicted with the disease called progeria, premature ageing. Their doctor told them that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or on his body, and would die in his early teens. He comments on his reaction to this appalling news:

what I mostly felt that day was a deep aching sense of unfairness. It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families ... How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?

Individual Tragedies

Let me be very personal. Let me go back into my own life to illustrate this apparent meaninglessness of which I am speaking. I was a

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missionary. A young Australian medical doctor came out to work just for a few months among the Somali nomads, who had virtually no medical care. Early one morning he was setting up his surgery tent ready for a day's caring work. A Muslim came up behind him, and thrust a knife into his back, into his heart and he fell dead. The two young missionary nurses had to load his body into their Land Rover and drive to Addis Ababa. I conducted the funeral service. Just before the service I went into the chapel to ensure that all was in order, and found one of those girls there, sobbing, shaking with grief... and something like anger... it wasn't fair... it didn't make sense.

Between the two apparent boundaries of life: birth and death, it is impossible to make sense of life. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the quality of life that we try to live, and the experiences through which we have to pass.

Mass Tragedies

But the disorder is not just a disorder of the individual tragedy. We must take into our thinking the mass tragedies that multiply the sense of meaninglessness. Six million Jews were slaughtered by the Nazi horror. My eyes are forever haunted by the photograph I have of a little group of nine Jewish women huddled by a mass grave in Latvia, waiting for their turn to be shot. There were three days in Kiev in the autumn of 1941 when thirty thousand Jews were executed. Or take Marxism. We had thought that under the Stalin purges of the nineteen-thirties as many as fourteen and a half million people had lost their lives. Until in 1988 it was admitted in Moscow that the figure must be put at least at thirty million—five times as many killed by Marxism as by the Nazi horror. Or again, take the so-called natural disasters. The disaster in Wales, at Aberfan, on October 21st 1966, when pitiless rain turned a slag-heap piled threateningly, carelessly, over the village, into a torrent of mud that fell not merely on to the village, but on to the school where little children sat at their lessons, and one hundred and thirty eight of them died at their desks. Or the Lockerbie disaster, when a terrorist bomb tore an aircraft apart and rained the pieces on a Scottish town, and Scottish country people died along with the American victims. Ninety-five football fans went to watch a football match at Hillsborough, and were crushed to death in the very eyes of the TV cameras.

The Human Disorder

And there is the frustration of the impotence even of the human will. We conduct a remarkable dialogue within ourselves, and find an inner tension, 'I' battling against 'myself'. In a crucial passage in his letter to Rome, Paul agonises:

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I do not understand what I do.
For what I want to do I do not do,
but what I hate I do . . .
As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it...
for I have the desire to do what is good,
but I cannot carry it out.
(Romans 7:15-18).

It is Paul writing these words: but it could be any one of us. Parents brutalising their own children. Husbands terrorising their own wives. Drug addicts destroying their own bodies. Ordinary people deceiving others, and in their turn being deceived.

How are we to characterise this human existence of ours? John Macquarrie comments:

A question like this can, of course, be answered only by a broad empirical generalisation, and such generalisations can always be challenged. Yet perhaps no one would deny that when we do look at actual human existing, we perceive a massive disorder in its existence, a pathology that seems to extend all through existence.

(*Principles of Christian Theology*, SCM, 1966, Chapter III, p59)

John Macquarrie's Polarities

On those occasions when we attempt to confront the human condition we eventually encounter what John Macquarrie identifies as the 'polarities of existence'. These polarities reflect the tensions of our human predicament, the conflicting parameters within which, somehow, our potential must be realised. There is, first, the polarity of *possibility and facticity*. It is possible to make plans for resolving the problem of large scale famine, but the fact may well be that those plans will encounter such bureaucratic resistance as will make them utterly irrelevant for today's hungry millions. To talk to the hungry peasant of a five-year plan is to mock him and his problem. As F G Bailey, writing for such people, put it twenty years ago:

No one can be sure whether the harvest will be good or bad; no one can be sure who will be alive this time next year, or even next week... In circumstances like this, no one can feel that man is the master of his environment: nature may have a grand continuing design, but a man's life is filled with discontinuities. No peasant thinks in terms of five year plans.

(F G Bailey, 'The Peasant View of the Bad Life' *Advancement of Science*, December 1966, pp.399-409)

There is the polarity of rationality and irrationality. We pride

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ourselves on being rational and yet so often behave irrationally. We strike out at those we love, and even at ourselves. The ethnic minorities, frustrated by the insoluble problems they face in the schools, in the labour market, economically, and even in the churches, lash out at whatever comes to hand, and with whatever comes to hand, in wild destruction that everyone knows to be unproductive. And the polarity of *community and individuality*. To be human is to be gregarious, and yet the very fact of community introduces pressures and tensions, whether it is the community of work or the community of the home. Everything appears to conspire to prevent me from being me: the real me that I know to be in here, somewhere, and almost desperate to get out. The real me that God wants released but that community imprisons. There is also the polarity of responsibility and impotence, the sense that I should do something about famine in Ethiopia and oppression in South Africa and genocide in Cambodia, and discrimination in Birmingham, and violence in Ulster, and the misery next door and across the street; and yet the knowledge that I can't.

Qoheleth: The Teacher

And if you think that this depressing view of life is in some sense unbiblical let me remind you first of all that it is the common experience today of millions, and that the Teacher expressed it for us three millenia ago:

'Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher, 'Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.
What does a man gain from all his labour
at which he toils under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains for ever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south and turns to the north;
round and round it goes, ever returning to its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
and yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
What has been will be again,
and what has been done will be done again.

(Eccles 1:2-9)

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So I hated life
because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.
All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun,
because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.
And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?
Yet he will have control over all the work into which
I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.
This too is meaningless.

(Eccles 2:17-19)

Man's fate is like that of the animals;
the same fate awaits them both;
as one dies so dies the other.
All have the same breath;
man has no advantage over the animal.
Everything is meaningless.
All go to the same place;
all come from dust and to dust all return.
Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward
and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?

(Eccles 3:19-21)

Again I looked and saw
all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:
I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter:
power was on the side of the oppressors—and they have no comforter.
And I declared that the dead who had already died
are happier than the living who are still alive.
But better than both is he who has not been,
who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

(Eccles 4:1-3)

RELIGION

In British schools millions of our children are being taught the absurdity that all religions are essentially the same. The fact is that religions have only one thing in common: they all believe that life ought to make sense.

Gautama the Buddha leaves his sheltered life to seek an explanation of human suffering, and, finally sitting beneath the tree, he proclaims the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path which on the one hand explain, and on the other hand offer a way that should eliminate suffering. Muhammad, confronted by the oppression of the poor and the insignificant in Mecca, and by the absurdity of a god for every day of the year, retires to the cave Hira and there begins to expound Islam: a law which is to explain and enrich life, and to disperse the meaningless-

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ness of life for the Arab peoples. Karl Marx, appalled by what he had seen and learned of the exploitation of the day labourer in British industry, retires, not to a cave, nor to sit beneath a tree, but to the prosaic surroundings of the British Museum Library, and there works out his science of society, his theory of class warfare, and offers the great eschatological age of peace and plenty, in a coming classless millennium,

But Christianity, too, may be nothing more than a religion. It was Christian religion which spawned the Crusades, with their appalling cruelty. People are produced who have sufficient religion to make them hate, but not enough to make them love. With its origins lost in tradition, its creed safely enshrined in a marvellous prose that is only with difficulty understood, multitudes claim to obey its modest demands to love one's neighbour as oneself, to do one's best, to live a decent life, to live at peace, to display the virtues of middle-class avarice, to walk the yuppy way. It is well provided with the learned, with orators, with complaisant politicians. It takes a multiplicity of forms, forms for every situation. Catholicism has its particular style of authoritarianism; Ulster evangelicalism its own popes and its own 'loyalist' terrorists.

Let us distinguish between religion and revelation. Within the visible church, as with the Old Testament community, there is the community of the redeemed, and (the optimistic statistics of the encyclopedias and the Church Growth statisticians notwithstanding), it is very doubtful whether that community is anywhere near to being a majority in the world. And yet it is there, brought to life by the Spirit, redeemed by the Son, sent by the Father, submissive to the Triune God, not in any religion, that the real answer to the apparent meaninglessness of life will be found.

Superficial Explanations of the Human Disorder

The obvious answer to the apparent meaninglessness of life is to insist that there really is some one-to-one correspondence between the bad things that happen to us and our sins. That appears to have been the popular view in the New Testament period.

John gives an account of the healing of a man who had been born blind, and includes in passing a fragment of dialogue which illustrates the contemporary explanation of suffering:

'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?
'Neither this man nor his parents.'

(John 9:2-3)

The baby was not blind as an oblique way of punishing his mother and

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father for *their* sin. The rabbis appealed to Exodus 20:5 in support of that view. But there was an alternative view: the baby could have sinned before it was born, while it was still in the womb, and blindness was the punishment for *that* sin. But Jesus rejects that, too.

However, it is important not to take these observations too far. Jesus did not entirely reject a relationship between human suffering and human sin. Raymond E Brown, in his commentary on John, reminds us:

Jesus does not accept that because a man was sick or suffering, it was a sign that he had committed sin... nevertheless, on a more general scale he does indicate a connection between sin and suffering.

(The Gospel According to John I-XII, 208)

There is a connection between sin and suffering, but it is not a simplistic connection. The simplistic explanation of suffering is again illustrated in Luke 13, in relation to two events, the details of which were well known to the people to whom Jesus was speaking, the Galileans 'whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices', and the eighteen 'who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them'. The Galileans came up to Jerusalem at Passover, the only time when people killed the sacrificial animal themselves. And for whatever reason Pilate set his guards on them, apparently at that very moment, which ensured that their human blood was, horribly, an ultimate blasphemy, mixed with the animal blood of the sacrifice. Only a Jew could feel the horror of such an event. The only explanation of such a horrific death must be some unknown but equally horrific sin of which the men were somehow together guilty. But Jesus says, 'No!'

And again, Pilate had an aqueduct constructed to bring water into Jerusalem, and he paid for the construction out of the Temple tax. Perhaps the tower at Siloam that collapsed was part of the system, and perhaps the general view was that those who took part in this act of impiety were drastically and memorably judged by God for it. But again Jesus said 'No!' Death of some kind awaits us all. But what God requires of us all, and not merely of some few who might be accused of gross sin, is repentance. But there is no one-to-one correspondence between our experiences and our sins. And so we return to our repeated statement: Within the apparent boundaries of human existence, birth and death, it is impossible to make sense of life. The nihilist smiles wearily: 'Life does not make sense. Sad. But that's the way it is'. Jean-Paul Sartre dismissed God from the universe, and as he himself commented, 'there disappears with him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven'. And then there is no hope of finding any meaning to life at all. But now we turn to the Christian answer to the apparent meaninglessness of life.

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Meaninglessness and the World in Which We Live

The mission of the church is to confront the apparent meaninglessness of life and to make sense of it. But let us be quite clear at the outset: as Karl Marx saw at the beginning of his search for an explanation and a solution to meaninglessness, it is not enough to describe, or even to explain the situation; our task is to change it.

Christianity is primarily a praxis, an action, an action which is to be taken even when our theory may as yet be imperfect. We do not need to await the perfect analysis before we offer a remedy. First of all let me offer four characteristics of our world.

A world of regularities

First we recognise that we live in a world of regularities. Without them life would be impossible. Stones fall to earth, fire burns, electric currents flow, ice melts, and all of this will be true tomorrow and the day after. Of course that is, of itself, a statement of faith: we can't know it until we see it. But we must believe it or tomorrow is simply too terrifyingly uncertain even to contemplate. Lighting the gas, turning on the light, drinking a glass of water, would all become operations fraught with danger.

But in return we face the certainty that fire will burn, whether we put a stick in the fire or a bishop *on* it. As surely as wings will lift a Boeing 737 into the sky, so the destruction of those wings will send the same plane smashing to the ground. Explosives will blast a way through a mountain or turn a car into a smoking inferno.

And if some of us would have God intervene in this law-ful and yet sometimes awe-ful world we must ask just when we would have him intervene. When the total carnage of a potential accident would exceed twenty human beings? And yet the life of one small child is of infinite value to every truly loving parent. When a Hitler, an Eichmann, is in prospect? But God knows the secret things, the torment inflicted by ordinarily-horrible human beings on those over whom they have power. The little every-day miseries. I remember being in the Republic of Ireland to speak at some meetings, and before the evening meeting I went out to walk quietly along the shore, to be still with God. And as I walked back there were a couple of little children playing on the rocks. Their mother came to call them home to their tea. They didn't want to go. And I have never heard such a torrent of filth and blasphemy that poured from the mouth of the wee lad: was he eight years old? Who taught him that?

O Lord! The clouds are gathering,
the fire of judgment burns.
How we have fallen!
O Lord! You stand appalled

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to see your laws of love so scorned
and lives so broken

(Graham Kendrick).

Shall God intervene? And if he were to do so, in his infinite knowledge of every one of us, where would we all be? And where would our world of regularity be? An infinity of divine interventions would make life simply impossible, all our futures unpredictable, we ourselves impotent and yet unprogrammed robots.

What God has done is to leave us with a world of regularity, of laws which may be discovered and used with confidence. And he has reserved judgement of what we do with it for another time and another place.

A Fallen World

But, second, we note that this is a fallen world. It is not the way it was meant to be, nor is it the way it one day will be. However we may choose to interpret the opening chapters of Genesis, they demonstrate a true insight into the very nature of this world: it is a fallen world. We rhapsodise over a glorious sunrise. And yet I sit at my breakfast table and watch a

blackbird on my lawn pulling a worm to pieces and swallowing it. One living creature destroying another. That, too, is the world.

While we have it we thank God for health, but millions have never known what it is to be healthy: children grow to a precarious adulthood, and tumble into an early grave without ever knowing what it is to have a full belly, or to enjoy freedom from pain.

And even when there is medical care available it is so shatteringly limited in what it can do. And then we experience the agony of impotence of Rabbi Kushner, or the frustration of a preacher like W E Sangster, whose son was desperately ill in hospital. Sangster stood at the foot of Paul's bed: 'I can't help you. Why can't I help you? Son, I'd go to hell for you if it would help.'

Old age is a burden and no pension, however generous, can ever compensate for the indignities so often encountered in it. As the Preacher saw it:

The light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away. Then your arms that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food... Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds, or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. You will be afraid of high places... Your hair will turn white: you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will have gone.

(Eccles 12:2-5).

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The fallenness of the world is demonstrated for millions just in the fact of their being what they are. The realisation that had I been the same real person but with a different mix of characteristics: a different colour of skin, a different accent, a more attractive body; if only I were not a woman, if only I were a woman, if only I were not a Jew, not black; if only I had not contracted polio. But I am what I never chose to be... and society doesn't want to know about me because of what I am.

A World of Failed Remedies

Peter Conlan of Operation Mobilization tells of an experience during a visit to China. He was sitting in a small room with an old Chinese medical doctor who had devoted his life to promoting Communism. And now he was near the end of his life, and he knew it. As they sat talking there came a long pause, and then the old man confessed sadly: 'It doesn't work, does it?' Perhaps there is no more remarkable failure of any remedy so far proposed for the ills of the world than the current collapse of Communism.

Karl Marx was born only in 1818, the first attempt at establishing a Communist state came only in 1917 with the Russian revolution, and yet in seventy years Communism has run its race. In the Soviet Union, in the Eastern bloc countries, the process of dismantling Communism has begun. On 19 October 1989 the Hungarian authorities issued instructions to dissolve the Communist cell groups in businesses and factories, and a week later proclaimed a democratic republic. All the world watched in amazement as a flood of refugees from Communism, by now more than one hundred thousand of them, poured out of East Germany and into the freedom of the west. In Poland the unthinkable was thought and then realised: Communism sharing power with Solidarity.

What now of the procession of western intellectuals, and not a few clergymen, who through the middle of this century lined themselves up with what may yet prove to have been the most brutal and repressive regime in human history, not even excluding Nazism? Bleating about the glorious liberties brought about by the Russian revolution and the glories of the new society being created there, they firmly closed their eyes to the realities of the concentration camps and the psychiatric wards and the prisoners of conscience and the worst example of genocide in all history.

And of course the irony of it all is that orthodox Marxist teaching is that under the relentless advance of Marxism religion would simply wither away. It is Marxism that has withered in the chill blasts of the gales of despair created by dictators whose savagery and oppressive measures far outstripped those of the capitalists they so loudly denounced.

But let us not imagine that the refugees from Communism will now find all their dreams realised in the capitalist society to which they have

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fled with such naïve confidence. Already, in a matter of weeks, some are disillusioned. Jesus has warned us, in a proposition that runs contrary to all that we are conditioned to believe: 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (Luke 12:15). Marxism fails in its fundamental supposition, a supposition it shares with capitalism, that life does consist in an abundance of possessions. The one system wants to see everyone with the same abundance, the other encourages individuals to create their own super-abundance. The fact is that ultimately things don't meet the need for meaning. God has 'set eternity in the hearts of men' and the kind of homesickness that eternity in the heart engenders cannot be satisfied by caviar, cake and Porsche cars.

Some time back the pop star Gary Glitter was the guest on BBC radio's Desert Island Discs. He was talking about a long holiday he had taken somewhere in the Mediterranean, trying to spend some of his enormous earnings. There was a brief pause as he thought about all the money... and then he added in a very quiet, sober sort of voice 'It's a burden you know'.

I hasten to add that this is no commercial for poverty. I'm not too sure about the theology of the currently popular Christian song:

'And now, let the weak say I am strong,
let the poor say I am rich...'

I think that both the weak and the poor should expect more from Christianity than that.

And there is the failed remedy of Islam. As with Marxism in the nineteen-fifties, so with Islam in the seventies and eighties we have been subjected to a barrage of propaganda presenting a seductively attractive, gracious and humble Islam, an Islam which those of us who have known Islam in other places, where it exercised power failed to recognise.

Terrorism in Lebanon, and the absurd war between Iran and Iraq, and the hostage-taking crystallised for us in the snatching of the Christian peace-maker Terry Waite, have at least served to give the world a better understanding of the intolerance that is intrinsic in Islam. The destruction of Salman Rushdie, who, we are told, has seen his wife leave him, unable to cope with the strain, and has had to face some seventy moves since the death sentence placed on

him by Ayatollah Khomeini, has shown us Islam's implacable strength of hatred. The Muslim *umma*, the community, has its positive side, but we now see the negative side: it is a community that will not allow dissent, that denies freedom to those within it, and, if it could, would deny freedom to those outside, too.

Of course we reject utterly the insensitivity which caused Salman Rushdie to write with such disregard of the feelings of the Muslim world. And we reject utterly any Christian backlash which would deny religious freedoms to the Muslims who have come among us. But we can

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no longer accept the picture of a pacific Islam, a gracious and tolerant Islam. And we can no longer accept Islamic law, which destroys a man without giving him any chance to defend himself, as a law which can resolve the human dilemma.

A World of Two Kingdoms

The undifferentiated monotheism of Islam necessarily commits the Muslim to determinism. Freedom to act, and so human responsibility, and even the very justice of God are threatened by this initially attractive and uncomplicated doctrine. The doctrine of God uncritically held by many Christians (who express it in such phrases as 'God is on the throne') suffers from the same defect. God is made the immediate cause of every misfortune, the explanation for all meaninglessness.

In confronting meaninglessness we have to be bold enough to recognise that there is a sense in which God is not on the throne. He does not wake up on a Friday morning with a quota of forty thousand cases of cancer and two thousand major road accidents to distribute, and work through the day organising radiation leaks, mechanical defects and the sale of alcohol to bring about the required result. We have to say that God did not plan the appalling tragedy in Wildenrath, West Germany, in 1989, when IRA gunmen ambushed a Royal Air Force corporal's car, enveloped it in a hail of bullets, left him dead and his wife hysterically cradling her baby, its head smashed by a murderer's bullet. God didn't plan that. That was devilish.

God works within the limitation he has placed upon himself, and part of that limitation involves the temporary, but on-going existence of a second kingdom. The purpose of that kingdom is always destructive. As it directs its power against humanity the purpose becomes specifically the destruction of all that is truly human in us. We are different from the animals. The human spirit does rise upwards, but the second kingdom is dedicated to the destruction of all that ought to be true of us.

Looking back into Mark chapter five, the wretched man tormented by a host of invasive spirits was being steadily destroyed *as a human being* by them. His natural desire to be with others had gone; he roamed on his own, among the tombs. His natural care for his own body was gone; far from caring for his body he was actively destroying it, hacking at it, tearing it. Natural modesty was gone, and he ran naked over the hills. And even the possibility of getting help from others was gone, as they fled from his terrifying and destructive power which could snap metal chains and sever strong ropes, a destructive power which spilled over from that second kingdom which was at work in him.

It is a kingdom that is at work in the world of alcohol and drugs, promising so much, delivering so little. If only those who set off at the weekend on a drunk could see themselves,

hear themselves. But they wake up from it always too late—and sometimes everlastingly too late:

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O Lord, Dark powers are poised to flood
our streets with hate and fear; we must awaken!
O Lord, let love reclaim the lives
that sin would sweep away:
and let your kingdom come.

(Graham Kendrick)

It is a kingdom that expresses itself through greed, a greed in which fortunes are made, and if they are lost they so often turn out to be someone else's fortunes. A greed which is a lust for wealth and for things, a lust for the power which wealth and things provide, a power which in its turn can somehow guarantee a future which is only very faintly perceived, a future from which God is excluded. And yet there is the unexpressed hope, perhaps, that he, too, if he proves to be out there after all, will be suitably impressed by wealth and power, that if not Access and Barclaycard, at least American Express will settle my account with him. And the destructive power of the Second Kingdom must also be seen to be at work in our abuse of the world in which we live. The pollution of the rivers and seas, the profligate use of irreplaceable mineral resources, the burning off of the forests, the destruction of wild life, the pouring of effluents into the atmosphere to be washed down as acid rain, or swept up to destroy the ozone layer, ail of this, too, bears that unmistakable destructive stamp of the Second Kingdom. Christians are necessarily, of their very birthright, 'green', seeing in God's original charge to humanity a commission to rule over what is God's as his good servants, and not as wildly careless hirelings.

The Mission of the Church: Responding to the Apparent Meaninglessness of Life

The mission of the Church is biblically understood as the people of God speaking and acting on behalf of God to explain and to resolve the apparent meaninglessness of life wherever that meaninglessness appears, and however it is experienced.

There can be no question of an absolute prioritisation of some kind of 'spiritual mission' over against 'social action'. These two cannot be allowed to become unique and opposing poles in the Christian praxis, but must be seen as sectors in a spectrum of action, all of which is properly 'mission'. And mission is not words only. In mission, the church, through its members, brings into the situation of apparent meaninglessness the power and authority of God. True enough not yet the full power and authority of that kingdom—the power of the Second Kingdom is not yet put down—but nevertheless a new and real power, external to us but operative both in us and through us to give to us and

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to anyone who will enter the kingdom a new quality of life, new hope, a hope that can give a deep, glad meaning.

A Response to Famine

I was for nineteen years a missionary in Ethiopia, and inevitably feel deeply the repeated appalling famines in that country. But here, too, we, as Christians, have both something to say and something to do. Famine in Ethiopia was not simply a matter of God turning off the tap, denying rain. As Sir Geoffrey Howe commented earlier this year: 'All the problems of East Africa are at heart problems of political mismanagement.' So they are.

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has raged now for twentyseven years and it has raged over precisely that area of the country which has seen persistent famine. Farming is at a standstill because the young men and women on both sides are locked into a war. The Marxist Ethiopian government admitted to spending more than 50% of the Gross National Product on weapons—and that for what is now reckoned by the United Nations to be the poorest nation in the world:

O Lord, over the nations now
where is the dove of peace?
Her wings are broken.
O Lord, while precious children starve
the tools of war increase,
their bread is stolen.

(Graham Kendrick)

But the Church does not simply stand to one side protesting and preaching. When Bob Geldof got to Ethiopia it was to find Christian famine relief workers already there. They had been there for the previous famine and they will still be there for the current famine. Christians had been sharing not just their concern, but their resources of people and money to lift the meaninglessness of life from people thousands of miles away.

But more. Christians were at work in Ethiopia to create a church: the three thousand congregations of the Word of Life Church, the two thousand congregations of the Lutheran Makane Yesus Church; people whose very lives represent a hope for the nation, a seed corn ready to die if necessary, but more importantly ready to live for Ethiopia.

And still that is not all that must be said, God has not failed. At the height of the last major famine in Ethiopia, in July 1987, Newsweek Magazine published an article entitled 'Feast and Famine', the first sentence of which stated baldly:

at a time when malnutrition and even famine are endemic in many countries, the world is swimming in nearly 400 million tons of surplus grain.

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The food is there. The will to share it is not. And if it sounds simplistic it is still true that it will take transformed men and women, transformed politicians and financiers, transformed people, if what God provides is ever going to reach the people who need it. I am most deeply convinced that Christian mission is not irrelevant in today's hurting world.

A Response to Accidents

If we have little experience of the major world catastrophes, certainly we all encounter those accidents which so often bring the hopes of people around us crashing to the ground. Christianity speaks to them, too.

As I have already indicated, I don't believe that God plans these tragedies. They are part of a fallen world, and they are part of a world of regularities. Nor is the tragedy to be shrugged off with a casual reference to Romans 8:28. I heard it done once. A young couple had a baby which was quite dreadfully malformed. And someone, unthinking (surely they can't really have thought that), unfeeling (surely they couldn't have felt with the couple) quoted it: 'All things work together for good to those who love God.' So dry your eyes! Whatever you may think, this is really for the best! No! But the fact is that *in every situation*, however horrific, God is at work to bring out of it whatever good can be brought out of it, to give courage to the one, to enable the other to offer love, and strength, and even tears. To pull in the outsiders to show the compassion of the family of God. That God can do, and that is what God does. And that is the real force of Romans 8:28.

A Response to death

The meaninglessness even of death can be resolved. I recall, still, the very first time I heard Paul's words in Second Corinthians chapter five used with power in a funeral service. A very young missionary doctor, Faith Rayner, had died. I was sharing in the funeral service. And I heard the confident words as the speaker pointed to the coffin there in the church before us:

Don't imagine that Faith is in that box. No! the storms came, the winds blew, and the tent in which she had lived for nearly thirty years blew down. But Faith is all right. She stepped out of the tent and into the house not made with hands!

True enough between the two apparent boundaries of life—birth and death—it may be impossible to make sense of life, but open up the boundary of death to the promise of heaven and a home, eternal in the heavens, and everything is changed. There's glory in that, glory to wipe away the tears from our eyes.

But let us remember that death is a subject to be tackled with the living, so that they can know what it is God is offering to them. It is not a

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gloomy subject, but death is an inevitability, the sting of which should be robbed of all power to hurt by the proclamation of glory!

And when we have to speak at the funeral of someone who was, so far as we know, not a believer, let there be no proud usurping of the prerogative of God: he knows, and only he knows, the condition of the one who has died. What I know beyond all doubt is that God would have these here who mourn; to be comforted, to know the God of all comfort, the God who comforts all, and who can make sense, even out of death.

A Response to Illness

Or take illness. The power of God may be seen in his breaking through the very regularities he has built into the world to reverse the course of illness, to bring miraculous healing. But again it does not always mean that. In a striking foreword to Henry Frost's book *Miraculous Healing*, Joni Earickson expresses with great poignancy the experience of the unhealed. She describes her own morning routine as she watches TV while she is being got up:

If it's Sunday morning there's often a TV preacher on... sometimes there's a healing service on, and I will watch it as I am being exercised, dressed, made up, and lifted into my wheelchair. It's rather paradoxical, to be sitting there, handicapped, and unable to care

for myself, listening to the sermon and watching people hobble onstage with crutches and walk off without them.

Joni Earickson has not been healed. And who of us would dare to accuse her of a lack of faith?

Can we, then, in any measure, dispel the apparent meaninglessness of Joni Earickson's pain—or ours? We, too, have suffered; we too, have experienced pain; and some of us for years on end.

Let me put it very simply: it is through our pains that we gain the right to say to others who are in pain, 'I understand'. My wife and I lost our third child. We have neither of us said very much about that painful experience. But the experience gives me the right to say to people I meet today who are passing through that same experience, 'I understand.' Christianity is not an all-risks covered insurance policy. But Christianity is God-with-us, in our experiences which are part of the common experiences of a fallen world. And God-with-us makes all the difference to Joni Earickson in a wheelchair or to me in my loss.

God-With-Us

In this phrase we come to the remarkable heart of our Christian faith: God with us. That is the great advantage that we have over all religions. It is not a terrifying God of destruction come among us that we celebrate, nor Yahweh appearing in glory and power on a mountain top,

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but God incarnate in a child born to an unimportant couple in an insignificant village, itself in an undistinguished and remote corner of an uncaring and unimpressed empire. God incarnate, charged with crimes he did not commit, and executed in a peculiarly barbaric way. As Pilate expressed the paradox with such limpid clarity:

You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people: and after examining him before you, behold I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him; neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him: I will therefore chastise him... (Luke 23:14-16)

Denied justice, denied dignity, dismissed as a mere pawn in politics, a mere statistic to be entered into the Roman legal records. This was not merely a prophet: this was Emmanuel, God with us.

As C S Lewis reminds us in his *Screwtape Letters* the spiritual world in general has the enormous disadvantage of being pure spirit. God in Christ became embodied—human. That bureaucrat of the Second Kingdom, Screwtape, bewails the fact that pure spirit can never really understand the human heart: 'Never having been a human (Oh, that abominable advantage of the Enemy's) you don't realise.' And there is so much that the Second Kingdom cannot realise precisely because it is pure spirit. But in Christ, God has come amongst us, and he knows! Never can we shake our fist at God and shout at him: 'You don't understand!' It is in us and through us that God looks to speak in compassion and to act in compassion, to cry out to this world, to bear and to break its meaninglessness:

Yet O Lord! Your glorious cross shall
tower triumphant in this land,
evil confounding,

Through the fire
your suffering Church display
the glories of her Christ,
Praises resounding.

(Graham Kendrick)

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