

(Dr. Angel C. Alcala was our guest preacher on Sunday, June 22, 2008. He was introduced to the congregation by Joel Pal, Chairman of the Board of Elders of Fil-Am UCC. Here is Joel's introduction, followed by Dr. Alcala's sermon.)

We are privileged to have Dr. Angel C. Alcala deliver the message from the pulpit today. When I saw him yesterday, I asked how he would want me to introduce him before his sermon. He said: "Just tell them I am the Chairman of the Board of Elders at Silliman Church, that's it ." That is how he would want me to introduce him, and that is how I would introduce him today.

But how could I not mention the fact that Dr. Angel Alcala is the epitome of a village boy who would not have the chance to break out of the mold if not for his strong determination and willful curiosity to pursue higher education? How can I fail to point out to our young people that his life journey is an inspiration for anyone who believes that with fortitude and faith, success is not impossible? A fitting example of one slogan I constantly hear nowadays: "Yes we can!" Not only did he graduate at the top of his class, but went on to pursue a career in biology -- in research, education, conservation -- respected and revered by his peers.

And how could I not mention the fact that in recognition of his administrative capability and visionary leadership, he was named President of Silliman University, one of the Philippines' Ivy League schools; and later on appointed by Philippine President Fidel Ramos to be Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources and later on as Commissioner of Higher Education, both cabinet positions.

I could mention a lot of his achievements, but for the purpose of my introduction, I will just mention something which, in my opinion, makes him a very special person. Dr. Alcala's life is a sermon in itself. He has worked hard to attain goals he is passionate about because he believes that God helps those who help themselves. His researches in biology led him to not only study and examine closely the earth's organisms and life forms, but to stand in wonder and admiration at the awe-inspiring beauty and splendor of God's creations. His long-time work in environmental science and his advocacy of conservation and preservation are testimonies of his belief that we do not own this earth, that we are mere stewards or caretakers, and that we have an obligation to keep it glorious and beneficent for the future generations.

In recognition of his works in conservation and ecology, he was bestowed with the Ramon Magsaysay Award, which as you know is usually referred to as the Asian version of the Nobel Prize. He is also a recipient of the Pew Fellowship in Marine Conservation, a prestigious award given only to 5 persons worldwide each year. He has a long list of awards and recognition, which I would not mention here, but which you can see when you google his name.

But the point is: here is a world renowned scientist, who wanted me to introduce him as an Elder of his church, whose main function, as you know, is to help the Pastor in the spiritual growth of the congregation. That tells us of his priorities. He wants us to know that in spite of his very busy work and travels, he will and can always find time for his church. At a time when scientists are skeptically looked upon as far-detached from their belief in God (I'm sure you've heard of scientist and atheist mentioned in the same sentence), it is a breath of fresh air to know that this world-respected scientist keeps God at the center of his life and takes his Christianity seriously. And, by the way, he is not

only the Chief Elder at SU Church. He is also Chairman of the Church Council.
We will hear the message of Dr. Angel C. Alcala right after the choir anthem.

Cyclones, Earthquakes, Tsunamis: A Christian View

A.C. Alcala

Emeritus Professor of Biology

Silliman University

Text: Psalm 121, I Cor. 2:13,16

Introduction

Natural events, particularly earthquakes, cyclones, and tsunamis, have occurred in the past ages. They are still occurring during our times. In simple as well as modern societies, the most common interpretation or explanation is that these occurrences are punishments for violations of the commandments of the gods. Only a few people explain these natural happenings in scientific terms of cause and effect relationships.

During the past two months, two major natural events occurred in Asia. One is the Cyclone Nargis, which hit Myanmar on May 2-3, 2008. This cyclone generated a very strong whirlwind with a speed of 190 kph and 2-m-high waves that devastated the Irrawaddy delta, killing an estimated 78,000 people and causing injury to at least 56,000 people.

The other calamitous event was a 7.9-intensity earthquake that shook Sichuan and other provinces of China on May 12 of this year killing some 60,000 people, injuring hundreds of thousand more, and wiping out of the map many towns in Wenchuan county of China.

The people of the world still remember the most destructive earthquake combined with a tsunami that generated 30-ft waves, originating off northern Sumatra, Indonesia in December, 2004. This catastrophe killed hundreds of thousand people. The United States had its share of catastrophes---the Hurricane Katrina. The Philippines has not been spared from tsunamis, for a tsunami originating from an ocean trench in the Moro Gulf caused the death of some 8,000 Filipinos in 1976.

All over the world, the natural calamities mentioned are highly influenced by yet another phenomenon--- climate change. More severe and frequent cyclonic storms resulting in flooding or droughts are being generated in nature. Low-lying lands and small islands in the South Pacific are disappearing.

Ascribing these destructive events to God shakes our faith in him, the source of all goodness.

As Christians, what do we think about the apparently more severe and more frequent occurrences of natural, catastrophic events on our planet, many of which bring untold suffering to humankind? Are these events God's punishment for our continuing sinfulness and transgressions of God's commandments? Or are they the results of the confluence of the workings of the explainable natural laws and the changes in ecosystems brought about by the actions of human beings?

1. Is our God a God of Wrath?

Does God impose punishment on people by allowing their destruction through cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis and other violent forces of nature? Some people apparently believe that God does so. It is common in the Ilonggo Visayan culture to declare a misfortune of a person as a "gaba" (karma) of God, especially if this person is an enemy. An actress was reported to have said that the Myanmar devastation by the Cyclone Nargis was a karma allegedly because of its oppressive army leaders. The Sichuan earthquake happened because of the alleged human rights violations of China. Some people cite the accounts of murders in the Old Testament as evidence of a vengeful God. Even the flood during Noah's time is cited to show a God of wrath for allowing a natural event to punish sinful people. What are we to make of these Old Testament accounts portraying God as the author of destructive natural events that often result in human misery and deaths?

First, portraying God as allowing or condoning murders, polygamy, revenge, slavery, deceit and other misdemeanors is what the writers of the Old Testament understood of the events they were describing. Dr. Proceso Udarbe in his book, *Biblical Foundations of the Faith*, suggests that in reflecting on the crude and un-Christian elements in the Bible, such as murder, polygamy, revenge, the approach is: the lower must be interpreted by the higher, the Old Testament by the New Testament and all parts of the Bible by the spirit, life, and love of Jesus. However, it must be pointed out that Jesus taught us an approach to the Old Testament religion recorded in the 5th and 6th chapters of Matthew when he used the clause "You have heard that it was said to them of old time, ...but I say unto you..." An example is Matt. 5:38-39: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." In other words, we follow Paul in his instructions to the churches that we must

“have the mind of Christ.” (our text, I Corinthians 2: 13, 16). “Since Jesus is the Word of God, the fullest revelation of God to man, the words of scripture come under his judgment... Anything which does not measure up to his standard must be recognized as being sub-Christian, or even un-Christian...” writes Dr Udarbe.

Second, I would like to affirm that the creation of the universe was a good thing. The first chapter of Genesis tells us that God pronounced the created universe as good not once but several times. All goodness comes from God. Jesus related goodness to the Father God when he said: “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in Heaven.” Christ himself went about doing good. Human beings have found the earth a good place to live in. In fact, information about the other planets in our solar system indicates that they do not have the conditions favorable to life as we know it on earth. Efforts to locate habitable areas in our solar system have so far yielded negative results. The implication of our present knowledge about the earth is that we have to thank our Creator, from whom goodness and help comes at all times (Ps. 121).

However, from the standpoint of human beings, the earth is not perfect down to the small details. Conditions on earth are in a dynamic state and changes and readjustments occur at times. From the past and present findings of geological and biological sciences, we know that natural upheavals that result in human discomfort occur from time to time. But from other considerations, they can be considered beneficial to the earth as a whole. Examples of these are variations in climate patterns, weather changes, temperature variations, rise and fall of sea level, and movements in the lithosphere (outer part of the solid earth) that may result in earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. God has allowed the natural processes driven by cause and effects to govern these natural events; this is analogous to God giving human beings the freedom to think and make decisions that are favorable or contrary to God’s will. The rational explanation of these natural events lies in the realm of the sciences.

Third, God can and does intervene in human affairs through the workings of the Holy Spirit. This is demonstrated by Christ when he performed miracles to help people as described in the New Testament. All Christians can easily testify to the goodness of Christ in their personal lives.

2. Role of Human Beings in Creating Natural Disasters

It is quite clear that these natural phenomena, some of which are destructive to humans, are not sent by God to torment or punish people.

They are the results of natural causes. In the case of Myanmar, logging has played a role. In the case of China, mining is partly to blame.

After eliminating the notion that God creates natural disasters, one phenomenon --- climate change---is known to have contributed to the natural disasters that are now occurring more frequently and more severely, threatening the survival of the human race and the integrity of the environment. Climate change provides a credible evidence for the direct link between human activities and the alterations in the normal functioning of Planet Earth.

Climate change, so well discussed recently by former U.S. Vice President Albert Gore, is caused by the increased concentration of the gas carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide is released to the atmosphere by all living beings but mainly by the burning of fossil fuels to provide energy for humankind. Its concentration in the air has almost doubled during the past 250 years. Carbon dioxide absorbs heat from the sun. This heat is re-radiated back to outer space and to the earth's atmosphere, increasing the temperatures and causing many changes on earth such as sea level rise, droughts, floods, etc. and other secondary environmental effects. Carbon dioxide, which is normally sequestered by plants for conversion to food, can no longer be removed from the atmosphere because of deforestation. Climate change will reduce food production, cause intrusion of salt water into land thus reducing volume of freshwaters, and will continue to flood low-lying land areas, displacing people.

It is clear that, if human beings' profligate use of fossil fuels to generate energy is the primary cause of climate change as shown by the increased frequency and severity of natural occurrences, then human beings, not God, are to blame for the recent environmental disasters mentioned above.

3. Summary and Conclusion

To summarize, natural disasters that have occurred recently are not caused by a loving God as revealed in Jesus Christ. They are caused by human activities that disturb the natural balance of nature. Christians should therefore not lose faith in the goodness of God despite the recent toll on human lives. What we should do is to ask help from the Lord, who made heaven and earth, as we face human disasters brought about by our failure to take good care of our planet.

6th Sunday After Pentecost
June 22, 2008 – 1:30 P.M.

Preacher: Dr. Angel C. Alcala
Sermon: "Earthquakes, Cyclones, Tsunamis:
A Christian View"

SCRIPTURE READING:

Psalter: Psalm 121

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 2: 13 - 16

Liturgist: Ms. Julia Noya

Pianist: Mr. Noel P. Rivera III

Organist and Choral Director: Ms. Rachel A. Dadap

COS Alumni String Quartet

Kevin Shue, *Violin*

Miyuli Miyagi, *Violin*

Yeou-Cheng Ma, *Viola*

Noa Albaum, *Cello*

Mr. Michale A. Dadap, *Elder-in-Charge*

Ms. Emily T. Villalba, *Steward-in-Charge*

Ms. Pinky Sevileno, *Trustee-in-Charge*

Mr. Art Taclob and Mr. Edwin Paul Tan, *Ushers*

Ms. Leofe R. Sitoy, *Floral Offering*