
Hurricane Katrina

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 4 2005 by The Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

How do we begin to make sense of the bewildering pictures and heartbreaking horrors emerging from Louisiana and Mississippi this week? I want to look with you at four ways of telling the story of Hurricane Katrina, each of which has a different central character.

The first story, and most visually absorbing, is a story about Nature. Here is a massive wind, and a colossal flow of water. These are forces of nature too big to fit in a television screen, too awesome to be described by even the most vivid eye-witness. Nature is not just about ripe fruits in gardens or soft refreshing rain; it is not just about purple headed mountains or rivers running by. Nature is about terrible destruction and ghastly death, about drowning and suffocation and terror and desperation. Meanwhile human nature, it seems is about both ingenuity and cruelty – about both humbling generosity and opportunistic wickedness. This week we have seen the truth about Nature, as a force in the heart of the earth and as a force in the human heart. But underlying the story about Nature is a lingering suspicion. The suspicion is that the earth's climate is changing. The concern is that, unless something changes quickly, the whole world is going to see a lot more of the terrorism of Nature, and a lot less of the ripe fruits in the garden. The rest of the world sees America as a country whose leaders assume this change of climate is not their problem. Climate change has hitherto seemed only to have affected far away places like Bangladesh. Well this week New Orleans turned into southern Bangladesh. This week the change in the world's climate became America's problem.

The second story, and the part of the story that has fascinated the chattering classes around the world, is a story about America. America is a country used to extremes of weather, along with extremes of much else. How many of us would be living in North Carolina if air conditioning had never been invented? It gets pretty hot here. Everyone who lives by the coast in Louisiana, or in North Carolina for that matter, knows perfectly well that when a warning comes, they need mighty quick to secure their homes, get in their cars, and head to their other home, or, in the event that they don't have a second home, for their relatives, or a hotel some way in land. But what if you don't have a car, what if you don't have handy relatives, what if you don't have money for a hotel? This week we have found the answer to that question. You die. If you don't die, you enter the nightmare of squalor known as the Superdome. The irony is almost too painful to point out: Americans are used to sitting back in the sofa and admiring the sporting skills of those who grace the Superdome, a great theatre of dreams; but this week Americans have gazed at the Superdome in horror as a theatre of nightmares. Is this the same America that conquered the Moon in 8 years and Iraq in 3 weeks? The hurricane has exposed the way America has come to tolerate grotesque extremes of wealth. Of the 30,000 people in the Superdome, no more than 100 were white. How many more people throughout America are living in economic and social conditions that leave them vulnerable to the terrorism of Nature? And why has all of this apparently taken America, or at least its government, by surprise?

And the third story, again with its distinctive central character, is a story about God. The great hymns are deeply aware of the relationship between God and the forces of Nature. 'Time, like an ever rolling stream,/Rolls all its sons away.' Well the rolling stream has certainly rolled a good few sons away this week. 'Our shelter from the stormy blast/And our eternal home.' Well there hasn't been much shelter to be had from the stormy blast this week, and rather a lot of people have been looking for an eternal home, having been swept away from their earthly one. For all our interest in the first two stories, about Nature and about America, as Christians we are bound to focus on this third story, the story about God. Where is God in Hurricane Katrina?

In a few moments we shall stand to say the words 'We believe in God, the Father Almighty'. If we truly believe God is almighty, well may we come to him in horror at this catastrophe in his created order, well may we rail against him for the many injustices of the story – the loss of life, the punishment of the poor, the devastation of livelihoods. Well may we pray to him for mercy for the survivors, succor for the devastated, strength for the rescuers. Deep may we ponder the mystery of his creative purpose, the beauty of wind and wave and yet the ghastliness of hurricane and flood. And anxiously may we fear his anger against those who reject his grace and

mercy, those who harden their hearts against the destitute, exploit the desperate, and withhold the abundance of his good gifts from those in plight and scarcity.

But let not that be all we say about the story of God. Let us remember, when we wonder why God doesn't do something, that he has already done something. He has given us good ways to live, and has countless times sought to persuade us to follow these good ways, whether by rescue or warning or example or threat. This is what the Old Testament is all about. He has come among us himself, and by word and wonder and purpose and parable he has offered us the gift of life through friendship with him. This is the story of the New Testament. Of all the catastrophes of the world, one stands alone: and that is the catastrophe that we rejected God's loving offer in Jesus. He died a terrible death. However low we go, even to the superdome itself, we need never look up to Jesus – only sideways: he went that low too. All God's anger against human depravity – and we have seen plenty of depravity this week, in many aspects of this tragedy – all God's anger was experienced by Jesus on the cross. But most importantly, death was overcome. The horror of Nature, its death and destruction, does not have the final word. Easter has the final word. So let's never say 'how can God do nothing?' for God has already done everything. The one thing he hasn't done is obliterate us. He did that to Jesus instead. Can you believe it?

And after the resurrection God sent his Holy Spirit to transform and empower his people, to turn sorrow into dancing and waste places into springs of joy. And we have seen the Holy Spirit this week. We have seen ordinary people offer moments of breathtaking kindness. We have seen glimpses of remarkable goodness, sacrificial selflessness, disarming generosity. There is no room on my boat: I shall swim so you can step on board. There is no more food: you can have mine. You have lost everything: everything that is mine is yours to share. You have no home: my home is your home. We have seen the Holy Spirit this week. So again let not our ponderings about God's goodness or our anxieties about his power blind us to the activity of his Spirit. God is anguished; but he is alive; and he is active.

The heart of Christian faith is the mystery of the Holy Trinity; and the heart of Christian faith today, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, is to believe not just in the apparently removed creator God, not just in the deeply co-suffering Son of God, and not just in the empowering and surprising Spirit of God, but in all three. God is not a buffet meal, from which we take just the bits our appetite and our waistline incline us to choose today. The heart of Christian faith is to take the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit together, *and believe that they are one God*, and that in creation there was already the suffering and empowering at work, and that on the cross there was the deep mystery of the Father and the profound subversion of the Spirit likewise at work. So if this week is a story about God, our response is first of all to pray, and second to say humbly but thoughtfully, 'We believe in one God'.

And that leaves just one story left. One more story about Hurricane Katrina, with its distinctive central character, and maybe the most uncomfortable story of the lot. This is a story about us. Where is Nature in this story? That's a scientific question. Where is America? That is an ethical question. Where is God? That's a theological question. Where are you in this story? That's a personal question. Keep me out of this. I don't answer personal questions.

Well maybe it's time we did. Where are we in this story? Inspired by the Holy Spirit to get involved, do what we can, and somehow bring some good? Identifying with Jesus, crucified perhaps by waiting for news of family or friends? Or are we the safe, distant observer, either binging on horror or retreating into wisdom after the event? Hurricane Katrina has revealed the truth about Nature – that it is always a potential terrorist at our door, is never to be underestimated and can cause unimaginable destruction. Hurricane Katrina has revealed the truth about America, that it is a nation that tolerates potentially catastrophic levels of poverty, has still not come to terms with the racial dimension of its social inequalities, and ignores climate change at its own as well as other's peril. Hurricane Katrina has revealed the truth about God, that however mysterious his ways he has definitively acted in a way that costs him everything and denies death the last word. But has Hurricane Katrina also revealed the truth about us? When you see those pictures, do you react as a child of Nature, a fellow American, or a child of God? Nature has always been dangerous, America has always been a land of extremes, and God has always loved us. What have we always been? Perhaps the question for us is, 'What have we always been like? And is it time to face the truth?'