

In the International Church Calendar we are in that long season between Pentecost and Advent.

The liturgical colour is green - the colour of life and growth - and week by week we are invited in our readings to reflect on our relationship with God and with one another – in other words how we can best grow and evolve in our lives as followers of the Christ.

Over the last weeks there have been a number of things that have caused me to pause, reflect and wonder in this regard...

None of us could have escaped being stirred by the power of nature unleashed in the movement of the earth in Christchurch. She rocked and rolled and seemingly solid ground became a seething mass of molten earth that quite literally lifted homes and houses and toppled buildings that have stood for over a century.

Early on in this disaster I heard the phrase ‘an act of God’.

Poor old God gets the wrap for everything!

And then Thursdays New Zealand Herald had this headline ‘Please God, let it stop’ – of course suggesting that there is a god somewhere who has some sort of control over these events and the movements of the tectonic plates on the planet.

But I thought the comment that created the headline said it all and I quote, “I was crossing my fingers saying ‘please God let it stop’.”

I thought that was getting the best of both worlds – crossing ones fingers and saying ones prayers!

It is this sort of headline and comment that perpetuates a ‘folk’ religion and takes us way away from the true gospel message of Jesus the Christ – a good news message of love and compassion.

The earth has rolled and will continue to roll until the plates that lie deep below us find a new place to settle and there is no god who can or will make that any different.

However in that same story I found some words of Gospel hope. One survivor is quoted as saying ‘...having each other is a big help ...it makes me feel safe, being with others...’

Surely this is the living Christ – giving safety and security in the company and love of one another...

Surely this is God at work...

Pause

And there have been other events that have caused me to ponder...

Often I awake in the early hours of the morning and my mind starts to whirr. Sleep eludes me and my only course of action is to get up, make a cup of tea and watch some television.

I usually end up watching BBC World. There are some surprisingly good documentaries screening at these bewitching hours!

One night last week however at around 3 am I started to watch 'Hard Talk' - a straight talking interview with a prominent figure.

The interviewee was a leader of Hamas in the Gaza strip and he was asked about possible outcomes of the proposed talks for peace brokered by the United States.

He immediately dismissed them out of hand and went on a vitriolic tirade about the evils of Judaism. The interviewer challenged him – did he really want peace. His venom and anger persisted.

The next morning I read in the New Zealand Herald a completely unrelated report of a Jewish rabbi who wanted God to wipe all Palestinians off the face of the earth. (Poor God again- being forced to take sides!)

In the same paper was the story of a Catholic bishop in Europe who had tried to talk a young man who had been abused by a priest out of pressing charges on the grounds that the priest was about to retire.

The man commented along the lines that the bishop was concerned for the welfare and feelings of his elderly priest, but '...how about my welfare and how I feel!'

And then just this week the bizarre story of the Pentecostal pastor who declared September 11th as 'International burn a Koran day'.

The three 'Religions of the book' – Islam, Judaism and Christianity and each one misses the point of the stories in the book that they purport to follow.

My heart weeps at these abuses of religion, religious power and theology.

And I would dare to say that my weeping heart is also the weeping heart of God.

Vitriolic hatred and condemnation; justification of serious misconduct and protection of the perpetrator; setting one's own religion up as better than another and then threatening to despoil that other religion's holy artefacts; and yes reducing the love of God to crossing one's fingers, have nothing to do with being a follower of the Christ. Indeed they are a sham.

Pause

The religious leaders in Jesus' day grumbled because he dared to share a message of love and inclusion. But it was not just a message – it was acted out in his person. He 'welcomed sinners and ate with them'.

The two parables that follow are potent messages which tell of God's unconditional love. Our task is to claim that love personally in our own lives and then share it unconditionally with others.

In New Zealand we have some brilliant writers of songs and hymns which simply and clearly outline this gospel. The Servant song is one of the best:

1. Will you let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.

2. We are pilgrims on a journey
We are travellers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load

3. I will hold the Christ light for you
In the night-time of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear

4. I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
'till we've seen this journey through

5. When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony

In these Ordinary Sundays, let us listen to our stories, let us reflect on the world around us, and let us share in word and action the living Christ whom we claim to be.