

What God Is NOT

Jesuit Peter McVerry works in the area of social justice.

An earthquake in Syria left thousands of people dead. A tornado in the US brought death and destruction to several towns. Flooding in Pakistan destroyed the crop harvest and left millions of farmers and their families penniless.

Did God cause the earthquake, the tornado or the flooding? Of course not. No one, still less God, would wish to inflict such suffering on people. If God did not cause them, did God perhaps permit them? Of course not. We live on a planet where physical, chemical and biological processes determine what happens. Nature, not God, produces some wonderful and awesome events, and some terrible tragedies. No one could, or should, believe in a God who would be responsible for, or even permit, such tragedies. During a TV interview with Gay Byrne on RTÉ's *The Meaning of Life*, Stephen Fry was asked what he would say to God on arrival at the pearly gates. He replied, 'I'll say, "Bone cancer in children? What's that about?" How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God



who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain? That's what I'd say.' There are many people, like Stephen Fry, who lose their faith in God because of a mistaken understanding of God. Many believe that God is a person – though admittedly a super, super person! – who thinks like us, makes decisions like us and is controlling everything that happens in our world. They pray for healing for a loved one who is dying of cancer, but they don't get healed, and wonder why God would allow the person to die if God could have saved them. Or they conclude that God just doesn't care.

It is not God, but our false images of God that we need to get rid of. God is not a puppeteer who is pulling the strings on everything that happens in our world. God is not a

person. God is three persons in one being. John's Gospel tells us that God is love, three persons madly in love with each other, and that their love has been shared with us human beings. Jesus prayed to the Father that 'the love, with which you loved me, may be in them, so that I may be in them' (Jn 17:26). And that divine love has been given to us so that we can share it with others and so witness to the presence of God in our world today. So where is God in the midst of the earthquake or tornado or flooding? God is not the cause of the earthquake, but God is the response to the earthquake. God is present in the love, kindness and caring of people for those who have suffered. Jesus, after the Resurrection, sent the Holy Spirit to his disciples. The Holy Spirit is now

Jesus, in his life, witnessed to the love of God by healing the sick, feeding the poor and eating with those who were rejected by his society. Today, we, through the Holy Spirit acting in us, are called to witness to the love of God in the world.

God's presence and action in our world, and in our hearts, inspiring us to love, to care and to share, and disturbing our conscience when we fail to do so. Jesus, in his life, witnessed to the love of God by healing the sick, feeding the poor and eating with those who were rejected by his society. Today, we, through the Holy Spirit acting in us, are called to witness to the love of God in the world. 'When the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, he will be my witness' (Jn 15:26).

As the beautiful poem, attributed to St Teresa of Avila, says:

'Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.'

What is the 'Good News to the poor' (Lk 4:18) that Jesus announced? It is you and I. And if we are not the good news to the poor today, then today the poor have no good news.