

Responding to Disasters



Lately our world seems to have experienced more than the usual number of conflicts between people and nations. There has been the war between Ukraine and Russia dragging on, a civil war with protesters being killed in Iran, fighting and destruction in the Gaza strip, and so on.

Then in Australia we have had an act of terrorism at Bondi Beach on Sunday evening December 14, with the killing of 16 people and the wounding of about 40. In response, our federal government has passed stricter hate speech legislation and gun laws to try to prevent such destructive actions happening again in our country. But is this really going to achieve its intended aim? It has been suggested that the hate speech legislation may prevent free speech in some situations, such as when we need to discuss both hate and love, openly and respectfully with others, to better understand why people hate certain other people.

In addition, recent bushfires and floods in Australia, made worse by our changing climate, have resulted in many people losing homes, belongings, livestock and crops. A few people have also been bitten by sharks in the sea. How can we as Christians cope with such disasters and the suffering they cause, and bring new life and growth of love out of them? Some people try to avoid reading or watching anything that upsets them, but is there a better response?

One possibility is to turn to God. We may find it helpful to gradually drop all the anxious thoughts pressing on us and let God hold them for a short time, while we rest and relax in God's love. As God's love flows around and within us, certain people or problems we had been wrestling with may arise in our minds. These we can place in God's love and talk briefly to God about them. They may then seem not quite so depressing. After all God is with us all and in all parts of our lives.

Next, with regard to conflict and hate, we might work at changing our outlook towards those we think of as different from ourselves. Instead of regarding people of a different religious belief or race as people to be ignored, or even rejected because of the past actions of others of the same belief or race, can we respect them, forgive them if necessary, learn from them and begin to appreciate them?

After World War 2, my mother rejected everything Japanese - people and goods made in Japan etc.. My mother was a trained nurse, and had a friend, also a nurse, who during the war was in the Australian army nursing injured soldiers on a ship. She and others were captured, shot and killed by Japanese soldiers. Many years later my mother was asked to give hospitality for a week to a young Japanese theological student. She struggled because of his race, but eventually agreed to accept him. By the end of the week, they were friends.

In Genesis we are told of God, who out of love, created our world and all that is in it, human beings, all creatures and nature. In addition, if we look around in our world, we can observe that God created everything and every person to be different. This difference, especially in nature, can enrich us and help us to see God's world as the wonderful place it is.

Difference in general can be understood as an expression of God's inclusive love. It can encourage us to grow in our understanding of other people. All people can then become like sisters and brothers for whom we have a responsibility to care about, and to work for their well-being.

In Ephesians 2:15-16, Jews and Gentiles are described as coming together in Christ as one new humanity. "He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." (NRSV).

As Christians, our differences, both within and between our denominations, through respectful and appreciative listening to each other, can become means of growth and unity in the Body of Christ. On the other hand, holding on to a negative outlook of dislike or even hate, leads to deeper divisions and conflict in the church and society as a whole.

The love of God, seen in the coming of Jesus into our world as a human being who loved all, and suffered and died for all, shows us something of how we are to care about others, Christians and non-Christians, and learn to love them as God loves us, and give our lives for them.

It has been noted in the media, that the recent disasters and conflicts in Australia have led people to respond by showing love and help to strangers. Regardless of danger to themselves, men and women immediately assisted those in need at Bondi, suffering a shark attack, and who lost so much in floods and fire. By their actions they demonstrated God's love. In esteemed heroic deeds and in small kind acts, God's loving presence which is in all people, whether they know it or not, is revealed.

Love for God and others can triumph over rejection and hate. A rainbow, as pictured in this leaflet, can emerge out of darkness as a sign of hope, love and unity.

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