

THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2005

EDITORIAL

CATASTROPHE - ONE OFF OR ONGOING

Since Boxing Day we have been subjected to millions of words and thousands of hours of TV on the subject of the Asian Ocean Surge or Tsunami which has killed, by a late count, over 200,000 people, and destroyed billions of dollars worth of property.

It may be said that there could not be anything to add to the volume of words and pictures that has not been uttered before. Yet there are some observations from either a Christian and/or human point of view that could be repeated, or has so far not been highlighted.

At the outset let us state clearly that no comment we make, or information we tender, can take the place of the charity needed in these tragic circumstances. When people are dying, maimed, or grieving loss of loved ones or property, we have a clear God given-duty to come to their aid. And like the Good Samaritan, help must be offered regardless of race, creed, colour, or circumstance. In this regard we are pleased to say that members and congregations of the AELC came forward spontaneously with commendable assistance.

An early observation is that as tragic and vast as this catastrophe is, it is by no means the worst or largest. Mankind has experienced many such episodes in his history. The impact of this event has a traumatic effect by virtue of the TV, radio, and rapid communications available to us all. Today we can see the dead or maimed on our TV screens within hours of an event happening.

The impact of instant viewing of these events is not necessarily a bad thing. In this case the dramatic pictures are, to a large extent, the cause of inspiring the nation to the great heights of generosity that we have witnessed.

However we should see things in the right perspective. The Asian catastrophe should not be seen as an isolated event. The world has seen what has been described as "an act of nature." We should do well to remember that our history is full of catastrophes for which we are responsible and which could have been avoided. Reflect on the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, when the British Army suffered 100,000 casualties on the first day. In 1917 the Third battle of Ypres in Belgium cost 300,000 lives including many Australians, and German losses in this battle were even greater. In 1945 Tokyo was fire bombed and the city set alight. Such was the complete breakdown of the city services that the civilian casualties have never been accurately assessed. We could list pages of such man-made catastrophes.

Then again, we have our own Australian-made catastrophe. The abortion industry kills an estimated 100,000 Australians every year.

It appears that here we have two sets of values. The Asian catastrophe has caught people's imagination and inspired worldwide sympathy and charity. We do not have

to fret over the cause; it is an "act of nature" over which we have no control. An "act of nature" has caused this terrible event which makes us extremely sad, or perhaps frightened, but we can get a warm glow of satisfaction by showing the world that we are kind, generous and sympathetic.

On the other hand, abortion, and we might include another scourge, AIDS, which is devastating Africa, is a moral and a man made problem. Fixing these problems requires acknowledgment of wrongdoing, humility, repentance, and the discipline to abstain from an evil practice, but a practice that wayward mankind finds attractive. In the case of AIDS, Governments seem frightened to adopt the solution by outlawing the cause. Rather, they throw millions of dollars at a medical programme to cure the tragic end results of the sin, results which are avoidable in the first place.

Regarding the Tsunami, Christians are prompted to ask, "What sort of message is God sending to a sinful world"? Are particular sinners being punished? People questioned Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices and also the incident when the tower of Siloam fell, killing eighteen people. Was this because they were worse sinners? Jesus answered, "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way." (Luke 13:1-5) One of our first reactions must be that we have all deserved far worse for our many sins. While we thank God that He has chosen to spare us personally from this calamity, such an incident must be a reminder to us all to live in ongoing repentance.

This is not a time for fear or despair. At times like this the true character of a Christian is revealed. In a fine article titled "Reflections on the Tsunami Catastrophe in SE Asia", Pastor C.R. Priebbenow concludes *"Finally, such a calamity is a reminder to us of our hope. We have no lasting city in this present life. We look forward to our Lord's promise of a new heaven and earth where there will be no more sorrow, suffering, bereavement, and tears."*

Statistics suggest that calamities of this kind are occurring more frequently and with more severity. We cannot presume that the Asian catastrophe will not happen again in some form or other. So the watchword is, be prepared.

A MODERN REFORMATION CAMPAIGN

The AELC has commenced a campaign to correct the errors that continually occur in some of the programmes promoted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Readers will recall that in November's Newsletter we published a letter to the ABC from Pastor C.R.Priebbenow concerning the programme on the Capture of Jericho.

Since then, the ABC's audience has been subjected to programmes on The Plagues in Egypt, the Birth of

Christ, and a story on Mary Magdalene.

Newsletter has written to local Federal Member David Jull who has taken up the matter, which is now to be reviewed by the Minister in Charge, Senator Helen Coonan, and we are awaiting a reply.

Letters have also been sent to the Executive Producer of the ABC in Sydney.

Readers are asked to also approach their local Federal Members setting out your wishes and complaints. **We would hope that Parliamentarians all over Australia receive letters from readers. Make your views known. That is what our Representatives are there for.**

Pastor Priebbenow wrote a lengthy letter to his Federal Member, Mr Ian McFarlane. This letter sets out in great detail the errors contained in these programmes and readers are encouraged to give it careful consideration.

We are aware that the ABC is not a mission body to promote Christianity. All that is required is truthfulness and honesty.

As replies come to hand Newsletter will keep you advised.

LETTER TO MR IAN MacFARLANE, MEMBER FOR GROOM

Mr Ian McFarlane, Federal Member Groom

Dear Sir,

I should like to draw your attention to an unsatisfactory tendency in the religion department of the ABC.

Australian Christians do not ask that their government or the ABC should actively promote the Christian faith. That is not their role. However, since our nation has been built on Christian principles, it is fair to ask that important information should not be withheld, and there should be no bias or unscholarly procedure when the religion department of the ABC broadcasts programs. We have a right to expect that the ABC will not be an anti-Christian propagandist. Once again, the Compass program last Sunday night, 26 December, was very misleading.

Four times in as many months, we have witnessed ABC programs attacking the Bible. On 26 September, a program cast doubt on the capture of Jericho, omitting more-recent archaeological information. On 15 December, a program attributed the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea to purely naturalistic causes. On 19 December, a program challenged aspects of the biblical record of the birth of Jesus, dredging up, among other things, a claim from the pagan anti-Christian propagandist Celsus in about AD 180 that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier, Panthera. There was a lightweight presentation of what the Bible says, and the last words were given to rationalists, who questioned what the Bible says. No reference was made to Origen's refutation of Celsus. On 26 December, a program based on Gnostic sources promoted a view that Mary Magdalene was an apostle and a founder of Christianity, without explaining the nature of Gnosticism. The program failed to point out the nature of Gnosticism as the reason for different views

in Gnostic documents from what the New Testament says, and that the writings of the New Testament clearly pre-date these Gnostic texts.

The program on 26 December operated with half-truths and unwarranted suppositions, like "Perhaps", "We can imagine", and "It is a possibility." It withheld important information that the viewers should have received. By hosting such a program about Mary Magdalene, the ABC has again taken on the role of an anti-Christian propagandist.

The program spoke about "startling new evidence" about Mary Magdalene. It failed to tell the viewers that the Coptic documents found at Nag Hammadi, probably in December 1945, were mainly Gnostic documents. The dry climate in Egypt probably accounts for the preservation of these documents on papyrus. Before 1945, scholars had previously known about Gnosticism chiefly from hostile Christian sources in writers like Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. It is true that some Gnostic documents were called *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Acts of Peter*, but they have no claim to represent genuine Christianity. It is true that *The Gospel of Philip* claims that Mary Magdalene was an apostle, but the program should have told viewers that this was a Gnostic document. Gnostics claimed to have secret, hidden knowledge. The idea that Mary Magdalene was a rival to Peter and that she received revelations from the risen Christ to pass on to the rest of the apostles should have been accompanied by the information that the Gnostics regularly claimed access to secret tradition to promote their views. It would have been typical of a document like the "Gospel of Mary" to assert that the other disciples of Jesus really failed to grasp the truth. The mistaken interpretation of Jesus' words, "Do not keep holding on to Me" (Jn 20:17) as "Do not touch Me" (as also in the *KJV*) would have suited the Gnostic desire to regard the material human body as part of the creation of a lesser deity during a lapse from goodness. By the biblical reports, it is mistaken to say that Mary Magdalene anointed Jesus' body for burial. She and other women were going to the tomb to finish the anointing, but Jesus had already risen. The NT clearly stated that Joseph and Nicodemus anointed Jesus' body while the women were watching where He was laid (Mk 15:47).

The New Testament was already grappling with incipient forms of Gnosticism, like the major errors of denying the resurrection of the body and of Jesus Christ's coming in the flesh. Gnostics denied that the body would have any part in salvation. They made considerable use of astrology. Some Gnostics like Valentinus used Christian words such as Jesus, Christ, Wisdom, and Truth for supposed lesser divine beings, through which spiritual people had to pass, by quoting the right passwords, on their way to the ultimate God. Most Gnostics denied that the creator-God of the Old Testament was this ultimate God. Near the end of the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, there is an assertion that the only way a woman can be saved is through becoming a man! Feminist propagandists are reluctant to quote that! The idea that Mary Magdalene was one who transmitted divine knowledge through private

conversations with Jesus is typically Gnostic, because for them salvation does not come through Jesus' blood, but through knowledge (gnosis) of how things really are and how to overcome the problem of evil in the world. For them, the origin of evil was cosmological.

One example of special pleading was an attempt to argue the feminist agenda on the basis of what it assumed to have been written in a lacuna (or gap) of the manuscript of "The Gospel of Mary."

It is true that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene, that she and some other women supported Jesus and His disciples from their own means (Lk 8:2-3), that she was present at the cross, and that she was the first to see Jesus after the resurrection. It is true that Jesus showed special concern for marginalized people (Luke 15:1-2). It is true that one of the chief qualifications for apostles was that they had seen the risen Lord. However, it is as fallacious to claim that therefore Mary Magdalene was an apostle, and a founder of Christianity, as saying that, because dogs are animals that have four legs, all animals that have four legs are dogs. It is right for all Christians to think of themselves as disciples whom Jesus loves, but unwarranted to allege Jesus loved Mary Magdalene more than other disciples. There is no "deliberate character assassination" of her in the New Testament, which frankly acknowledges her as the first witness of the resurrection (John 20). The Compass program even expressed doubt that the risen Jesus really appeared to Mary Magdalene. People who call themselves Christians and deny the resurrection of Jesus should be honest enough to admit what Paul says of such people in 1 Corinthians 15, that they are more to be pitied than all others.

It is true that the disciples of Jesus did not believe the first reports of Mary and the other women about Jesus' resurrection, but foolish to assert that there was continuing anger and opposition to her on the part of Peter, that Peter saw her as a rival for leadership, or that she was spiritually more mature. It is foolish to allege that she told Peter about secret conversations she had with Jesus, or that Mary Magdalene turned the hearts of the disciples to the good and encouraged them to spread the Gospel when they were afraid. That plainly ignores the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples and Jesus' equipping them with the Spirit at Pentecost.

It is true that little is known about Christianity in Egypt until Pantaenus about AD 180, and that Clement of Alexandria and Origen had to combat Gnostic ideas that had a strong hold among some intelligentsia in Egypt. It is true that in the Middle Ages Mary Magdalene was mistakenly identified with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50 and regarded as a prostitute. Her weeping at the tomb on Easter morning, linked with the weeping of the woman of Luke 7 at Jesus' feet even produced the word "maudlin", meaning "tearfully sentimental", as a derivative from "Magdalene." Regret for this misattribution, however, should not lead to acceptance of some Gnostic claims about her role.

There were clear signs that the university people

who spoke on the program were advocates of feminist theology. One speaker alleged that Mary Magdalene "single-handedly brought about Christianity." It suited the speakers on the program to allege that there was difference emerging in the early church about the roles of Christian men and Christian women. However, the New Testament is very clear that the apostles whom Jesus chose were all men (Lk 6:12-16). When Judas was replaced as an apostle, the two candidates put forward were men, Barsabbas and Matthias (Ac 1:23). It is foolish to say that a reaction against Mary Magdalene as a "founder of Christianity" came in the fifth century. Jesus was the founder of Christianity, and already in 1 Corinthians, written probably in AD 58, His apostle Paul specifically prohibited leading speaking roles for women in the churches (1 Cor 14:34-40). There is a resurgence of Gnosticism these days, and an increasing connection between it and feminist theology. If the ABC is determined to be a propagandist against orthodox Christianity, its claim to this role deserves to be challenged.

Pastor C Priebbenow

(Copy to Mr David Jowsey, the Executive Producer of the ABC, GPO Box 994, Sydney NSW)

OUR UNIVERSE

The Philip's Great World Atlas, Sixth Edition, is a masterpiece of map reproduction. It also tells its readers about The Universe as follows, "About 15 billion years ago, time and space began with the most colossal explosion in cosmic history, the so-called Big Bang, that is believed to have initiated the universe. In the millionth second of its existence, it expanded from a dimensionless point of infinite mass and density into a fireball about 30 billion kilometres across, and has been expanding ever since."

Readers should go over this statement again with a critical eye. What you are asked to believe is that out of absolutely nothing, not even a vacuum as we know it, i.e. an airless space in a container, but a condition where there is absolutely nothing, there came a massive explosion.

Now, to cause a massive explosion vast quantities of explosives are required. This is a question that is studiously ignored. It is astonishing that millions of people accept this without a query or murmur. But a carefully documented account of Creation as in Genesis is dismissed as a lot of nonsense. When comparing the two propositions the Big bang theory simply does not add up, and its believers will next accept that there are "fairies at the bottom of the garden."

But there is more. Philip's Atlas goes on to say that "A few billion years later atoms in relatively dense regions began to cling together under the force of gravity. About 10 billion years after the Big Bang a star was formed on the outskirts of our galaxy and enough matter was left over to create a retinue of planets. Nearly 5 billion years later after that human beings evolved."

What's this? It was all pulled together by gravity. Wonder where the gravity came from?

A CALL FROM THE STARS AND STRIPES

It is not only the small body of Lutherans in the AELC in Australia who have grave concerns about the destination of Lutheran churches around the world.

An American viewed our web site and emailed Pastor Peter Ziebell for more information and a copy of our Statement of Faith.

The Statement was forwarded and the reply confirms that the concerns in Australia are not isolated occurrence.

Our concerned contact writes. "I received the Statement of Faith and am presently reading it. This appears to be Orthodox Lutheran exposition if not Orthodox Christianity regardless of denomination. I think it critical to disseminate in America. Congregations are kept in the dark regarding syncretism and the watershed issues facing us. Confessionals are marginalized. 'Cheap grace', Grace without repentance and Biblical Doctrine is flowing like cheap wine in our churches as a whole. Unionism with the already apostate protestant denominations is lusted after. Please pray for us, your brethren in Jesus Christ."

Might I impose further on your generosity by requesting 10 more copies of Statement of Faith that I might give to selected congregational members? Finally would you give the cost of postage for 100?

"How can I express the joy it gives me to see your faithfulness to our Risen Lord? It is a great encouragement to me. I have no position or status and am just an ordinary layman."

To our new contact in America we can say a hearty thank you, and add that we understand your position perfectly. We have seen it all before on our own door step.

The Movie "Luther"

The movie "Luther" will be in cinemas from 3 March. This is different from the film about Luther on television recently on SBS. That film was more interested in Luther's contribution to individual freedom. It played down the crucial point, justification by God's grace through faith in Christ, without human works. That film was unfairly critical about Luther's advice to governments to suppress the peasants' revolt. In commenting about his attitude to the Jews, that film failed to point out that for Luther, this was not a racist position, but purely a religious one. He had no problems with Jewish people who adopted the Christian faith. However, this film is different, and is warmly recommended. Uwe Siemon-Netto described the film "Luther" as "a marvellously fast feature film, which is both theologically sound and entertaining."

Those who might like information about screening in local areas should check the website www.lutherthemovie.com.au. We suggest just one interesting point to watch for. In a recent issue of *Logia*, Martin R Noland, in "Luther's Reformation and Its Ongoing Relevance Today", wrote, "Still there is no avoiding the conclusion that Luther's doctrine of justification found its *origin* in his rejection of the propitiatory power of priests. There is a scene in the film

that shows Luther's presiding at his first Mass on 2 May, 1507 at the chapel of the Erfurt monastery. He bungled it during the preface, where he began to speak directly to God the Father. He was afraid of the Mass. He had grown up to think of priests in a propitiatory role between the lay people and God. Suddenly Luther saw himself as having to speak to God without a mediator. In such a position, he was aware only of his sin and unworthiness. In grappling with the doctrine of justification through faith, he had yet to learn that his problem was not his conscience but his understanding of the propitiatory power of the priest. He had not learned that, because of Christ's work, there was no more offering for sin. The Lord's Supper was not an offering to God for sin, but a testament, a promise of forgiveness to man stemming from Christ's cross.

Those who cannot get to a cinema may be interested to know that Pastor Priebbenow has the film on DVD. The Downs Guild and Men's Fellowship have the opportunity of viewing it during their meetings in the next months, and a copy of the DVD can readily be borrowed from him at no cost.

THE EMAIL POST

Our email news service has been launched with a number of news items not normally seen in the press or on TV being emailed out to those people on our address list.

More subscribers are welcome. Write, phone, or email your wish to be included in this up to date service. The editor can be contacted at the address below.

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