

8th Sunday after Epiphany (A): CCSY, 27 February 2011, 8am

On 21 October 1966, at 9.15am, high above the Welsh mining town of Aberfan, 150,000 cubic metres of water-saturated colliery waste broke away from its dumping site and headed downhill at high speed. The front part of this mass became liquefied on its journey and 40,000 cubic metres slammed into the town below at a depth of 12 metres. Among the first things in its path was Pantglas Junior School, whose pupils had just emerged from singing 'All things bright and beautiful' in assembly (our final hymn at 10am today). The death toll that day was 144 (very close to that which stands in Christ Church, NZ, as we worship this morning), 116 of whom were children aged between 7 and 10. In his novel *Saturday*, author Ian McEwan has his central character cite the Aberfan disaster as the reason why he does not believe in God: an intellectual position theologians call 'protest atheism', for which I have deep respect.

A decade later, Church of England priest William Vanstone, in his award-winning book *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, reflects on this disaster:

We do not believe, of the children who died at Aberfan, that God willed their death as a means to some greater good . . . We believe that, at the moment when the mountain . . . slipped, 'something went wrong': the step of creative risk [became] the step of disaster: the creative process passed out of control. Our faith is in a Creator Who does not abandon even this, nor those who suffered, wept and died in it, but Who *so* gives Himself that He finds, for the redeeming of this, yet more to give . . . Our preaching on the Sunday after the tragedy was not of a God Who, from the top of the mountain, caused or permitted, for His own inscrutable reasons, its disruption and descent; but of One Who received, *at the foot of the mountain*, its appalling impact, and Who, in the extremity of endeavour, will find yet new resource to restore and to redeem.¹

'Can a woman forget her nursing-child?' The prophet Isaiah has God pose this rhetorical question to Israel in our first reading (Isaiah 49:8-16a). 'See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.'

In Christ, the pain of God's children is forever inscribed on the palms of God's hands by the nails which tore the Son from the Father on the cross. And, in Christ, all things are being made new.

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¹ London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977; p. 65, emphasis added.