

## Publishing Editor's column

**A**T THE TIME these words are being written 2004 has not quite ended, but one thing is sure: it has been a year of disasters. Hurricanes in the Caribbean and floods in South-east Asia caused much damage and loss of life, and the capture by terrorists of a school in the Russian town of Beslan resulted in the death of hundreds, mostly children.

Terrible though these disasters were, they have been completely eclipsed by the undersea earthquake off the coast of Sumatra early on 26 December, which caused huge waves of water (known by the Japanese term for such waves, tsunami) to sweep across low-lying coastal areas around the Indian Ocean, with enormous loss of life. This disaster has dominated news headlines to an extent seen recently only in the fall of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre in September 2001. By the time these words are read the full extent of the loss of life will be better known; as I write the toll is still rising.

One reason why this terrible disaster has dominated the media is the widespread effect of the earthquake, much more widespread than would have been the case if it had occurred inland. It must also be acknowledged that the fact that many people from Western countries were holidaying in areas affected by the earthquake has made it much more newsworthy; a similar loss of life from an earthquake somewhere in China would not have received the same attention. Indeed, one parallel that can be drawn between this earthquake and the disaster of 11 September is that both affected many nations, for all kinds of nationalities were represented in the World Trade Centre, as its name indicates.

There is also an interesting contrast that can be drawn between these two great disasters of recent years. The attack on the Twin Towers killed people who were at *work*, many of them making lots of money in the employment of financial institutions. The people from Western nations killed by the tsunami on the shores of the Indian Ocean were for the most part engaged in *pleasure*, though we must not, of course, forget that most of those killed were local people, generally very poor by Western standards.

But what lessons do we draw from this latest disaster? It is not that God was particularly angry with those who happened to be in the affected areas, just as it was not that He was

particularly angry with those who happened to be in the World Trade Centre on that terrible September day. After all, many readers of this magazine will have well-paid jobs or be living in prosperous retirement and will also have enjoyed holidays abroad. The lesson is surely that stated by Jesus on receiving news of a disaster: "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3,5).

Another comparison that can be made between these two great disasters is that both struck at the beginning of a day, on a beautiful sunny morning, and came upon people completely unaware that it was to happen. It is to be hoped that, whether we are at work, on holiday, or anywhere else, we have made ourselves right with God so that if disaster strikes we shall be ready to face our Master in hope, not fear.

We often quote 2 Timothy 3 regarding our own times, and amongst the characteristics of "the last days" that we read of there is that "men will be . . . lovers of money . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (vv. 1-4, RSV). We could perhaps say that, just as the disaster of 11 September was a warning to those who are lovers of money, so the disaster of 26 December is a warning to those who are lovers of pleasure.

There are various scenarios of how sudden disaster could strike our world. With men like Osama bin Laden seeking to undermine and destroy Western civilisation, and indications of increasing instability in the natural world, who knows what might come upon the earth, and soon? After Christ speaks of the times of trouble that will precede his coming, including "the sea and the waves roaring" (we believe both literally and figuratively), he warns us, in words that make us think of what overtook people on those Asian beaches, to expect disaster and prepare ourselves to escape from it:

"take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Lk. 21:25,26,34-36).

Tony Benson