



ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL

MELBOURNE

ABOVE THE WATERS

Above the Waters

Does God forget? *Can* God forget – people, places, events?

The attempt to respond to such a hypothetical inevitably draws upon classical arguments about the nature of God as we imagine it, and uses imagery that necessarily constructs the ideal Supreme Being. The scriptures rarely tread a rarefied path like this; rather, they report, with varying degrees of honesty and self-consciousness, what it feels like to be a creature that has been encountered by God, and who is (somehow) made in the image of God.

So, in answer to the hypothetical, ‘Does God forget?’, the writers of scripture are likely to reply (when we go looking) with something along these lines: ‘Sometimes it *feels* as if God has forgotten us’, even though, if pressed, they would conclude that if God is God, then God cannot really forget anything.

I have not had opportunity to speak with anyone who in this current round of devastating floods has lost everything; or at very least, been temporarily and spectacularly inconvenienced and disadvantaged. I know what it looks and sounds and smells like: I cannot forget Banda Aceh, nor the strained conversations in broken English and pidgin Bahasa with Acean survivors. I also know that some do – and will – feel as if God has forgotten them, assuming that they once thought that God was there to remember them in the first place. To be forgotten by God must, in experience, be the same thing as to be abandoned by God: fine distinctions do not apply here.

For individuals and communities that seek to have a lively and active faith, disaster must always go in search of meaning, and this imposes a second, unwanted burden – trying to make sense of what has happened, and in so doing to restore order to that part of the universe where chaos threatens to dissolve everything. Hence, the bizarre conclusion reached by one recent Christian commentator that the Queensland floods were permitted by God (and note that there is a fine line between divine permission and divine action) because the Foreign Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd (who is a Queenslander, of course), offered what was interpreted as a criticism of Israel while visiting Jerusalem late last year. I leave you to be the judges of such an opinion.

The mind behind the book of Genesis was bold and unapologetic when it came to painting a picture of the human experience of God, and he/she used a broad brush. In the reading we heard from Genesis there are two very important points to which we ought pay close attention: the first, God’s covenant promise never again to obliterate ‘every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth’ by means of the overwhelming of the waters. A Supreme Being can do that sort of thing, I suppose – snuff out all existence at a whim; but the God revealed here is neither capricious nor almighty for its own sake.

The second point has to do with the first, and it touches upon the *rainbow*, that beautiful natural phenomenon that is invested with theological significance and meaning.

We often imagine that the rainbow is for us as a sign of hope, and so it is, but only indirectly and secondarily. The rainbow, according to Genesis, is primarily *for God*: ‘When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, *I will remember my covenant...*’. This carries the shocking and disturbing suggestion that God *can* forget, *can*

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be overwhelmed, as it were, by the complexity of events, and that we and all around us can be overlooked. But this is surely an accommodation to our thinking, our language, our experience. It is a scandalous reminder to us that God takes note of circumstance, is close by, is involved – though not always in ways that we would like or design were we to be asked.

The story of Jesus' stilling of a storm on a lake takes the possibilities to an even more dangerous edge, because it implies that nature is somehow a mythic beast, ever threatening to break out in rebellion: that God is its ultimate Master, as demonstrated in the person of Jesus, is clear. But it is more a declaration of a final state, yet to be experienced by us, than it is of a present reality; for now, the possibility of some equivalent of a gaol-break by the forces of nature seems more likely.

The hard-edged realities of our time – floods, fires, droughts, and so on – are given even greater power when we lament an ideal world of our own creation and seek to inhabit it, rather than dealing with the one that is before us: this imagined world has no sharp edges, no gravity, no inconvenience; but neither does it have any freedom, any reliability, or any promise.

What ought we do, then, for our part?

We ought lift our hands in prayer – even a prayer of complaint and lament (and we have lost the honesty and healthfulness of both); we ought give of our substance and skill as we are able; we ought learn such lessons as may be drawn, and apply them to the world in which we live (have we damaged the climate? Do we steward the environment aright? Ought we live where we live?); and we ought remind God, as it were, of God's covenant part, as we remind ourselves of ours a shovel in one hand, and a prayer book in the other.

So let us pray...