

Natural Disasters

Some years ago I spent a holiday near Naples in southern Italy. Towering over the city and the surrounding countryside is Mount Vesuvius. It was Vesuvius that engulfed the Roman towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum in AD 79, and it is still very much an active volcano. Indeed it last erupted as recently as 1944. When it will erupt again no one really knows but it is likely that it will do at some point. It is said that a greater danger is posed by the so-called Phlegraean Fields, a lower level crater on the other side of the city with hot springs and steam jets, and a strong smell of sulphur, which in the nineteenth century was frequented for health cures.

A couple of years later I stayed in Taormina on the island of Sicily. From the roof terrace of the hotel one had an uninterrupted view of another active volcano, Mount Etna. At night you could see the red of the molten lava – an impressive though somewhat worrying sight, Taormina, we were assured was a safe distance away, though.

Today, the 13th of October, is marked by the United Nations as the International Day for Disaster Reduction. This year's target is focussed on prevention, protection and reducing the number of people affected by disasters.

You would think that the easiest way for people to avoid natural disasters was not to live in areas where such phenomena are expected. The area around Mount Etna gives a clue as to why people still live in such areas, though. As a result of the volcanic eruptions the soil is so fertile that different crops flourish. Risk has to be weighed against economic advantage. And of course areas prone to other disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes and forest fires are so extensive, as we have seen recently in Mexico, the Caribbean and Florida, and now in California. People so often do not have a choice but to live in such areas.

Yet there are technological solutions that can protect people at least to a certain degree. Buildings can be made to withstand earthquakes and hurricanes. Evacuation procedures can be introduced to minimise the loss of life. And in the case of natural disasters exacerbated by human misuse of the environment a concerted effort to agree and implement wise policies can also help.

Sadly it all comes down to money, to a reluctance to invest where there is no expectation of profit. Yet if what was spent on wars and conflicts could be diverted to such measures that would surely make a great difference. But the political will needs to be there.

In the Bible references to earthquakes and other natural destructive phenomena are often seen as heralds of the end of days, as in our Bible reading just now (Mark 13.3-10). For those affected by such natural forces such a scenario can seem so very real. Yet with God's help human being can do much to make ours a safer world. That is our hope and our prayer.

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