



I know where they are.
I am where they are.
I bring them to you.

'Praying the news - faith and the everyday world'

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This is a talk I gave in April 2001 to a church Lent group. I've changed some references to bring it more up to date, but that the issues were the same 13 years ago is part of the point.

How much news do you see/listen/read in an average week? There's a constant stream of it filling the TV screen, brought to us every minute of the day through news feeds, Twitter and the like. The days of watching only the 6 o'clock news, and a newspaper over breakfast are long gone for most people.

When the news is full of horrific scenes, like those in recent days from the Gaza strip and Ukraine - with gruesome images broadcast all over social media, we can have a mixture of reactions:

- tune out, especially when it affects people we are geographically or culturally distant from
- feel guilty that we're comfortable, while others suffer.
- feel overwhelmed, in despair that anything can be done,
- seek simple reasons to explain or blame – it's God's punishment, Putin, Obama, Blair!

Sometimes, the scale of the world's problems are so overwhelming that we give up and do nothing. Like the shipwrecked sailor in A.A.Milne's poem who

"had so many things that he wanted to do
That whenever he thought it was time to begin,
He couldn't because of the state he was in.
... he never could think which he ought to do first.
And so in the end he did nothing at all,
But basked on the shingle wrapped up in a shawl.
And I think it was dreadful the way he behaved –
He did nothing but basking until he was saved!"

Christians can be tempted to do nothing but basking until they are saved, too, but we are called to care about other people, to be concerned about justice, and peace. We can't simply ignore what's going on in the world, but neither can we take on the weight of the world's sorrows. So, here are some thoughts about how we can respond:

1. This is the way of the world

This is the way the world was, is, and will be for the rest of human history. Human nature is such that we sanitise the past, and it often feels as if things are uniquely bad now, compared to the golden days of old, when we didn't have to worry about awful things like violent crime, epidemics, falling stock markets, or whatever. But every age has its problems.

To say, “this is the way of the world” may make it worse, at first sight, but it can also help to put things in perspective. Jesus says in Mark 13, ‘Don’t be troubled when you hear the noise of battles close by and news of battles far away. Such things must happen, but they do not mean that the end has come. Countries will fight each other; kingdoms will attack one another. There will be earthquakes everywhere, and there will be famines.’ (Mk 13)

I once heard a commentator say Jesus was in effect saying, things will carry on as normal; these are the sort of things that do happen in the world, they don’t mean anything. I’m not sure about that as an interpretation of that particular text, but I do find it helpful to remember that Jesus lived in an age that had its wars, famines, natural disasters, and local tragedies - like the eighteen people who died in Siloam when a tower fell on them (Luke 13). Jesus did not preach his gospel in a nice, friendly world, so that it makes no sense in our own awful times, but in a world of bad people and horrific events which parallel those in our day. The main difference is that technology has shrunk the world, and speeded up our knowledge of what goes on in it.

It often seems as if all the news is bad, but that’s a good sign. News is something out of the ordinary. Crime and catastrophe dominate the headlines only when we live in a world in which such things are relatively rare. Nonetheless, there are also positive stories of scientific advances, of triumph over adversity. The news media let us share in the joys, good fortune and happiness of others. Look out for these too. True, a lot of ‘happy’ stories are about so-called ‘celebrities’ having relationships or babies with each other, but I guess it brightens some people’s days. Sport can provide a lot of cheer, taking people out of themselves to share with thousands of others in something bigger. In one sense sport doesn’t matter, there are more important things in the world. In another, it’s an important part of human life, which draws people together, and it provides entertainment even when your society isn’t thriving.

2. People like us

The news media is very good at making stories come alive. TV, radio, newspapers and social media allow people the other side of the world to tell their story in a way that immediately connects with us. We can probably all think of images that have stayed with us, touched us with someone’s suffering, or joy. I remember an interview with a man caught up in some event I can’t now recall, on another continent. I’d not been paying much attention, and then he was asked the crass question, ‘how do you feel?’ and he began, ‘I feel what any father would feel,’ and there was a connection. I couldn’t ignore his story any more, he was reaching out to say, I’m a parent like you, hear me.

One way of responding to what feels like a mountain of need is to look for an individual in news footage, or in a photograph, and to pray for them specifically. This helps us to know about people, where they are, to be there too in some sense, and to bring them to God.

Having said that, do the news media go over the top and play on people’s feelings sometimes? Do we always need to know the distressing detail of news stories? [Suzanne Moore](#) has recently written in the Guardian about the trend for sharing horrific images on social media. The assumption is that I, the sharer, care passionately about this, and you, seeing the image, will be jolted from your apathy. But I don’t need to see the brutal detail to know that something awful is happening. And as Moore says, it strips dignity from those whose shattered bodies are shown. It’s a further insult to the victim to have their suffering paraded in front of us.

One can argue in some cases that it’s right that we see that a bombing raid isn’t just pretty fireworks with “collateral damage”. People get killed and maimed. It may be necessary to know details of child abuse in order to make changes that will prevent future children suffering. It may be necessary so that justice can be done, so that public opinion, aware of the extent of an offender’s brutality, makes sure they get punished. But there isn’t always a ‘public interest’ justification, and the media can be intrusive, or hype a story, or make political capital out of it. So much imagery of death and suffering can desensitise us.

On the other hand, people involved in tragedies may *want* to tell their story. A head of Victim Support once said that what victims most want is for 'attention to be paid', to know that what has happened to them matters to other people, and is being taken seriously. Sometimes individuals will use a terrible experience to try and achieve some good for others - Suzy Lamplugh's mother with her campaigning about personal safety, for example. But how *much* we need to know to take something seriously, is another matter.

3. Who is my neighbour?

As a Christian, I am to love my neighbour as myself, I am to be concerned about justice, and care for poor and marginalised people. But how far does that extend? Does someone become my neighbour, just because the media makes me aware of their story? It seems wrong to ignore someone's suffering, just because it's the other side of the world, yet we can't, as individuals, take on everyone's suffering without being overwhelmed.

As I've thought about this, I've asked how I respond to something that happens on my doorstep. There are occasional road accidents at the junction I live beside, and my first response on hearing the crunch is to see if there's anything I can do. Do I need to phone an ambulance, administer first-aid, comfort people, or are there already enough people doing those things. Long-term, if the road layout's contributing to accidents, I might raise that with the authorities responsible. Otherwise, if other people are helping, the best thing I can do is to get out of the way. I'm tempted to gawp, peering from different windows for the best view. I might go and talk to other bystanders to try to make sense of what's happened. But maybe I respect a victim more by not staring, by turning away. As a Christian, I'll offer all those involved to God in prayer, but I don't necessarily have to be involved.

So, what if the news media bring a distant event and put it on my doorstep? It's possible to go through the same questions:

- Can I do anything effective?
- Are there local people taking responsibility, so I'm not needed? What support are they asking for?
- Is there some reason why it is important for me to be involved – because I belong to a country which is politically involved, and therefore I could make a difference through campaigning, lobbying, etc.?

But if I'm not going to be involved, should I turn away, or switch off, so as not to be intrusive? The phrase 'rubber-necking' gets applied when people passing a road accident slow down to look, sometimes hampering rescue attempts. It's a natural human response, what's happened, why has it happened, poor things God help them, thank God it's not me! But not staring may be a way of showing some respect to those involved.

Similarly, perhaps there are times when we're confronted by a news story with which we aren't going to get involved, and it will be right simply to commit it to God, and turn away, or switch off mentally or physically. I admit to feeling an element of guilt when I do that, but I cannot comprehend and care about everything, all the time, and remain sane.

However, while I need to learn that I don't have to save the world, I can't get away with ignoring it all either. As I view/read/listen to the news, some things touch me. I am fired by a particular social issue because I've seen it at first hand, or someone in my family is affected by it. I am moved by the story of a plane brought down because I've often been there, cruising at 33,000 feet. Some people are scathing about this. It's wrong that you only care about a plane crash, but take no notice of a Chinese bus crash, or the ongoing tragedies in South Sudan. It's selfish to care about deafness, because of my mum suffered from it, but not mental health.

But another way of looking at this is to see the interest and sympathy that's been aroused in me as a sign that God has laid it on my heart, given me a special responsibility to get involved physically, or to pray, or give aid, or try to animate others. God begins with us where we are: who is *my* neighbour? Who is laid on *my* heart?

4. We are not alone

None of us is called individually to save the world single-handedly, but to play our role as one member of the worldwide church that is the body of Christ. We will find allies in the causes that we've taken on, some within

our own church, some in other churches and communities. We shouldn't be disheartened that everyone isn't with us, since others will have their own concerns laid on them by God. Within a church community, too, there will be people at a stage of life where they can't focus on the world outside. Someone caring for a small baby, or a frail dependent adult, twenty-four hours a day; someone who's ill, or experiencing a personal tragedy, is unlikely to have much energy for responding to the needs of others. They need to be held and cared for by the church community, while the church as a whole looks outward and is active in the world.

Seeing ourselves as one member of the Body of Christ can also help us to accept our limitations. Our life's contribution is likely to be small, few of us will change the world on our own, or be noticed outside our immediate circles, but we still all have a role to play. Maybe one reason for feeling overwhelmed and powerless in the face of the news, is that we have an inflated sense of our own importance, we expect to be able to have an impact, to make things happen. Occasionally, individuals do have an effect, but for most of us, it's about working alongside others, doing what we can, and not getting downhearted because we haven't saved the world at a stroke. As American theologian Sharon Welch puts it:

'Responsible action means changing what can be altered in the present even though a problem is not completely resolved. Responsible action provides partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolutions by others'.

5. Who is MY neighbour?

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to answer that question, and we sometimes take the parable as suggesting that anyone we meet who's in need is our neighbour, whom we must care for. But the main point of the parable is to get us to address the question, who is MY neighbour? And Jesus is suggesting that my neighbour is the person I hate the most, the one I am most prejudiced against. A dramatisation of the story would open with the scene before the Good Samaritan sets out, showing him railing unpleasantly against the Jews, while the Pharisee and the Levite are full of holy plans and wise words.

So another way of responding to the news is to note who really annoys us, who we have the least sympathy for. Who do we sound off against in the privacy of our heads, or among like-minded friends? That is the very person who is my neighbour, whom I should love as I love myself, try to understand and pray for. It might sound as if that's the opposite of what I said earlier about directing our energies and prayers towards those whose stories touch us. But we're also being touched by those who get our blood pressure up. God speaks to us through the people we instinctively react against, as well as those we warm to.

Ann and Barry Ulanov offer insights on praying for our enemies in their book *Primary Speech*. When we pray for an enemy, or for someone we really dislike, we allow ourselves to acknowledge all the hurt and anger we feel around that person, but make ourselves pray "through clenched teeth" that God's good will may operate in their lives. We find ourselves fighting to hold to God's merciful presence in the midst of vengeful urges towards them, but as we do so, our attention shifts from what they've done or not done, onto ourselves.

We're led to ask: how do we allow them to acquire such power over us? What is it in us that responds to them like that? Our enemies make us bring to light painful hidden corners of ourselves that we would prefer to leave dark, hateful bits of ourselves. They're useful, because they let us see ourselves from a new angle. Praying for enemies also changes our attitudes to them, lets us see them as God sees them. For Helen Oppenheimer, every human being is irreplaceable. When we see the cold-blooded murderer, or the drunken, violent tramp, we might find that hard to accept, but, she says, God says of them, 'but I loved that one, I did not want him lost.' God's love for our enemies must shape our response.

6. Praying the news

Praying the news changes us. Again, I've found the Ulanovs helpful. They acknowledge the strength of the fears we can develop for ourselves, our children, friends and communities - the sorts of things that get exacerbated by the news media. We may be afraid of war and disaster, that the world's evils are uncontrollable, and that even small scale reforms seem to wreak havoc. We desperately want a God who's going to make everything

feel alright. Except that God doesn't make everything alright. However hard we pray for those we love, we cannot protect them from harm or illness. We can't even prevent ourselves from hurting those we love sometimes, and we certainly can't protect them from others. God does not altogether remove our fears, for there is no guarantee that none of our fears will come true, but we can come to see that God is present with us in these fearful situations. Praying changes our love from a closed hand, which is trying to keep a rein on our loved ones, to an open one, which simply confides them to God's keeping.

We enter God's presence through prayer for those we love, or hate, through prayer about the incidents of suffering or of joy that come to our attention. People are laid on our hearts, and 'who is going to pray for x,y,z, if we do not?' Prayer understood in this way is not about altering the course of natural events. Rather, say the Ulanovs, when we pray in this way, it *does* change *us*. Prayer protects us from the inflated conviction that we can do it all, protects us from burning out, opens us up to meeting God in the everyday, opens us up to new ways of seeing problems.

Our prayer reaches out to others - if we are in pain from an illness, we can reach out to others who are feeling the same. We see how we ourselves have caused hurts. We become attuned to the scattered lights of goodness in the darkness of the world, held onto by the faithful who witness to goodness, and to the presence of God in world. Prayers are answered by our being drawn more thoroughly into the life of God. 'Praying the news' is not about stopping wars and ending poverty or getting God to give us a win at football, but it does help us to take the world seriously without being overwhelmed.

**'Prayer is not an escape from the
world, but an entrance into it.'**

Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech* Westminster/John Knox Press