

“How Great Thou Art”

In 1906 a 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck San Francisco, destroying 80% of the city, killing 3,000 people and leaving some 300,000 out of a population of 410,000 homeless.¹ A recent documentary described people as wandering through the ruins of the city “dazed and humbled”. Humility isn’t generally a reaction to natural disasters that you might expect - though perhaps it should be.

As a species we tend to consider ourselves to be invincible - that we are in charge of our world and that we have an answer and a solution to everything, or if we don’t we’ll find one. Take the current debate over climate change: do we honestly think that we can control the climate? I’m not talking about global warming which may well be something that is within our sphere of influence even if not our total control, but the Earth’s climate was doing what it does for millennia before we made our appearance and it will continue to do so whether we are around or not. We are powerless in the face of Mother Nature and yet we arrogantly persist in the pretence that she can be tamed and controlled.

How would we have “tamed” the following events, choosing just four or five examples from the relatively recent past in addition to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906...

On the night of January 31st, 1953, floods struck the coasts of the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, as a combination of a high spring tide and a severe windstorm in the North Sea caused a tidal surge of more than 18ft above normal in some locations which overwhelmed sea defences causing extensive flooding. In the UK alone nearly 1000 miles of coastline was damaged and sea walls were breached in 1,200 places forcing 30,000 people from their homes and damaging 24,000 properties at an estimated cost of over £1.2billion in today’s money. 307 people lost their lives on land, and 224 in vessels lost at sea. In the Netherlands dykes were breached in 67 locations and large parts of South Holland, Zeeland and North Brabant were inundated. It’s estimated that 1,835 people died and 70,000 were forced from their homes. Sea water covered 527 square miles of land, drowning some 30,000 animals and damaging over 37,000 buildings and destroying a further 10,000.²

In May 1980, Mount St Helens in the US state of Washington erupted with an explosive index of 5, blowing away the entire north face of the 9,677ft mountain and creating the largest landslide of rock and liquid mud ever recorded. The ash cloud rose 80,000ft into the atmosphere and ash was deposited across eleven US states and two Canadian provinces³, and it

¹ (Wikipedia)

² (“ ”)

³ The joke at the time was, “Don’t go to Washington State, it’s coming to you!”

generated mudslides along river courses as far as the Columbia River 50 miles away. Fifty-seven people lost their lives and it caused damage estimated at over \$3.4million in today’s money. It was declared the most disastrous volcanic eruption in US history.⁴

[The *volcanodiscovery* website says that on average there are 50-70 volcanoes that erupt every year around the world.]

In late October 1998, hurricane Mitch (the second deadliest Atlantic storm on record) formed in the western Caribbean Sea and strengthened to category 5 with 180mph winds – the highest possible rating – before moving through Central American where it had a catastrophic impact, particularly in Honduras (which suffered half of the 11,374 deaths that Mitch caused) where it destroyed 35,000 homes and damaged a further 50,000, leaving up to 1.5million people homeless. It then moved on to Guatemala and Nicaragua continuing to destroy and to kill and depositing over 6ft of rain in its wake.⁵

[On average there are six Atlantic hurricanes and three major hurricanes – meaning wind speeds in excess of 111mph – every year. In 2019 there were seventeen Pacific typhoons and four super typhoons that struck Asia.⁶]

On Boxing Day 2004, an undersea earthquake in excess of magnitude 9 off the west coast of Indonesia generated a series of tsunamis up to 100ft in height which killed over a quarter of a million people and caused widespread destruction in fourteen countries bordering the Indian Ocean, making it one of the deadliest natural disasters ever recorded.⁷

[The British Geological Survey says that every year around the world there is an average of 15 earthquakes with a magnitude of 7 or above.]

The 2011 tornado season in the United States saw the largest number of tornadoes produced by a single weather system in recorded history with over 1,600 (771 in April alone; 216 in a single day). Fifteen were rated EF4 (166-200mph winds) or EF5 (winds in excess of 200mph). 550 people were killed and damage was estimated at \$25billion.⁸

If you have ever read *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, you will be familiar with the illustration on the front cover of the book of the little prince standing on the tiny planet that he comes from and which the author explains was “scarcely larger than a house” – indeed it appears to have just one tree, a few flowers, and a couple of tiny “hills”. I mention this only because I’m sure this is how some scientists view themselves in proportion to the planet they are so convinced they have mastery of. They may eventually find ways of

⁴ (Wikipedia)

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⁶ (“)

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predicting earthquakes so that early warnings can be issued, but they will never be able to stop them, and the same is true of volcanic eruptions. Hurricanes and typhoons (and tornadoes to a degree) can be forecast and their track predicted, but again we are powerless to stop them and are mere observers when they occur.

So, to put things into perspective, let's say you are sitting in your garden enjoying a sunny day. The light from the sun that is shining on you took about 8 minutes and 20 seconds to travel from the sun it being on average (depending on the Earth's elliptical orbit) some 93 million miles away and light travels at 186,000 miles a second. The next nearest star – Alpha Centauri – is so far away that it takes its light four years to reach the earth. Our solar system alone is said to be at least 7 billion miles in diameter; I have no idea how they know that. To reach the outermost planet, Neptune, would take 12 years.⁹ What all of this tells us is that the universe is big, *very* big, and in the scheme of things we are extremely small and insignificant creatures on the face of our planet and completely at the mercy of forces and events over which we have absolutely no control whatsoever. One large earthquake, one major hurricane, or one devastating flood will prove the point, hence those people wandering through the ruins of San Francisco “dazed and humbled” by the magnitude of what had happened to them and the fact that somehow they had survived.

What such an experience also teaches us is that we are not in charge of our lives, but that God is. At the same time it's important to remember that God isn't responsible for disasters, but he makes an easy target when we can't find anyone else to blame. We perhaps need to recall the prophet Elijah's experience on the mountain:

There came a mighty wind so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks. But God was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But God was not in the fire. After the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak. (1Kings 19 v11-13)

What God *is* responsible for is the greatness and wonder of creation that we see and experience in the world and the universe around us. In 1885, in Sweden, Carl Boberg was caught in a sudden thunderstorm as he walked home from church; just as suddenly the storm subsided to a peaceful calm.¹⁰ The experience prompted him to write a poem entitled “O Great God”. He also had the words of Psalm 8 in mind:

How great is your name, O Lord our God, through all the earth!

⁹ (*Universe Today* and *Cool Cosmos* websites)

¹⁰ (*Wikipedia*)

*When I see the heavens, the work of your hands,
the moon and the stars which you arranged,
what is man that you should keep him in mind,
mortal man that you care for him?*

In 1949 Methodist missionary Stuart Hine translated the poem into English and set it to music giving us one of our most popular hymns: “How Great Thou Art”. I think the first verse and chorus express what we’ve been saying:

*O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the worlds thy hand has made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art.
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art.*

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