

FOCUS ON FAITH

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MAKING SENSE OF TRAGEDY

Up until last Monday I was fully expecting to write this latest Focus on Faith article on a completely different subject than it has turned out to be. But on that day the shooting at Virginia Tech University happened and my plans changed.

I'm sure like many people across the globe but especially in America, I was shocked by the way innocent lives were tragically cut short and the impact this must have had on the families, friends and colleagues of those killed or injured.

So many questions come to mind:

- What drives someone to commit such an atrocity?
- How could it have been prevented?
- Where's the sense behind it all?
- When will something like this happen again?
- What lessons can we learn?

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But I guess for many people one of the biggest questions that comes to the fore is, *"If there's a God how could He let this happen?"* It's a question I've asked in many different circumstances – in fact, just like Biblical characters we read about, I've been known to shout this question at God when situations in my life have not gone according to my plans.

Let's face it thousands of lives are turned upside down every day. It might be a suicide bomber or roadside bomb in the Middle East; the natural disasters of earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunami; the loss of life following an illness – the devastating ravages of cancer or a heart attack. It could be a rail or air crash or the fact that on average 60 people in the UK lose their lives in road accidents every week. And then we have the tragedies of Virginia Tech, Columbine High School and the more recent Amish School deaths. Even in Britain, where our gun laws are thankfully more stringent, there was Dunblane and of course in recent times we've had a number of knife-related fatalities.

Can we make sense out of all of this? I admit it's hard – in fact it might even be impossible.

The problem I have (and I guess I'm not alone) is that I want to understand why? I'd like to know the bigger picture and be able to put it all in context. The trouble is – and this is not a cop-out – that's God's job and His prerogative – not mine.

That's why this column is called *'Focus on Faith'* rather than *'Focus on Understanding'*. We're called to trust God even when we don't understand – in fact because we don't understand. Just like my son used to hurl himself off chairs, steps, rocks and anything else high off the ground in the confident expectation that I would catch him, we are called to place our security and hope in a God who also cares and seeks the best for us.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah spoke on God's behalf – ***"For I know the plans I have for you", declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."***

For many travelling the journey through dark and lonely places following the death of a loved one, the break-up of a marriage or the loss of a job, this verse may not immediately bring comfort or peace. None of us is exempt from problems but the way we react to adversity is the key. Over the last couple of months, there have been a number of incidents in my wider family which have tested my resolve and hope in God. Even though these situations haven't yet been sorted, I've been supported not just by friends but by the knowledge that God is still on my side.

I won't ever see the big picture this side of heaven and there will still be questions in my mind when adversity strikes or accidents happen. Jesus said that we needed the faith of small children and the writer of the book to the Hebrews stated that without faith it is impossible to please God. I don't believe God minds us questioning what's happening around us but He does ask us to trust Him completely.

But I guess the ultimate question is, ***"Who are you going to trust with your future if you don't trust God?"*** He does have the answers, and even if we can't understand everything, thankfully He does!

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