

Preached by the Revd Professor Sabina Alkire, Honorary Chaplain, on Rogation Sunday (10 May) 2015, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

Professor B is a well-groomed, articulate, quite western Nepali. Educated in the US and UK, married to a Brit, and presently serving the government of Nepal in a high rank, he is sophisticated and remarkably at ease in many contexts. I picture him in New York. As we had corresponded but not spoken since the earthquake, yesterday I naturally began by asking how he was faring.

He said:

“Everybody is working hard – some from their individual or community networks, others from organisations. Some are contributing financially to relief funds. Personally and professionally, many of us are going to different areas to help the victims... As for myself, at the moment I’m trying to deliver and communicate from government side, and to support victims with relief packs – tarpaulins, food, clothes, water – along with some cash. But all of us – in politics, in civil society, it seems everyone is doing this, finding our relatives, going in the different districts where the massive victims are, giving food and supporting the people.”

On the one hand, his comments are natural – they are what we imagine. Yet a few weeks ago, I could not have pictured urbane Professor B to be single mindedly worrying about such banalities as tarps, food, and water. I somehow doubt he would have pictured it either. It could have seemed beneath his dignity, a task for lesser minds.

When we hear the gospel words, ‘abide in me’, and ‘abide in my love’, these can sound so nurturing, one becomes wistful. The invitation seems to be akin to having a good soak in bathsalts –to rejuvenate and restore. Or we may imagine ourselves floating through life as peace and kindness overflow and blessings follow in one’s wake. Lovely. Yet the image of abiding in God’s love during an earthquake and its aftermath has something to commend it also.

Earthquakes, of course, are mentioned often in the Bible. Before Moses received the 10 Commandments on Sinai, the earth shook. God spoke to Elijah after an earthquake in a still small voice. When our Lord perished on the cross, the earth quaked; another earthquake rolled away the stone closing Jesus’ tomb. An earthquake followed Pentecost; an earthquake freed Paul and Silas from prison, and earthquakes are prophesied in the end times.

Abiding in love, those first moments when the very ground itself is shifting and may liquidize altogether, when buildings may topple, and other people and valuable artefacts are at risk, requires tremendous dexterity – physical as well as mental. One’s whole being comes into high alert. One can find oneself at the same moment in terror, in a clear state of prayer, moving swiftly to seek cover, thinking of one’s loved ones, and planning next moves.

After the shaking stops a first impetus is to find loved ones. Abiding in love includes abiding during grief of personal loss, or alongside people who are wounded or in anguish over their loss. In the case of Nepal, this task of finding people is ongoing. Professor B said that Friday he had rung a district officer, whose area still had not been reached by supplies, even now, and had quake victims. A buddhist monk, led a party of several people, walking five days to reach his village. Part of the party turned back on day four because the path had

been wiped out in a landslide and was dangerous to cross. When he got home, he found that his father, who was the local religious leader, had perished in the earthquake. So he stayed although he had not finished theological studies, to offer prayers and serve his community.

In the short term, people are repurposed. It is not only that professors peer into logistics, but that bored college students and tourists find themselves in Caritas kitchens or Buddhist temples preparing food parcels; that all who are able, search rubble; that soldiers and nuns hike to remote villages carrying tarpaulins, grateful for any recent gym workouts; that volunteers busy themselves making open-street-maps; that specialists use dogs and radar to detect trapped survivors; that the dead are recovered and prepared for burial.

Of course, tensions arise – there will be corruption and exploitation as some people use the trauma for personal gain. There will be a lack of coordination among actors who have never worked together like this before – both duplication and horrific gaps. There will be uncertainty and inefficiency, delays and disagreements how best to manage the process and who is in charge. People in grief and need will express resentment, suspicion, and blame; rumours will fly; politicians seek recognition. This is no shock: these factors are normally present. Abiding in love must continue in the face of betrayal and deception by some; hearty incompetence by others.

All the while, aftershocks continue. Professor B mentioned these still come two or three times a day. A friend skyping on Friday said there had just been a strong aftershock, 5 on the Richter scale.

But within a week or two, new flexibility is required. Professor B said they are transitioning now to an intermediary phase – the next 6 months, when the priority is putting up housing, because the tents will not withstand the arriving monsoons, and getting children back in school by 15 May despite the loss of 24,000 classrooms, giving small loans so trades spring back up. So as the adrenalin subsides, each person has to shift gears and find a new path, then adjust to complement others as it becomes clear what the ongoing opportunities and gaps are. In the intermediary phase other issues may emerge – in Nepal there is a looming debt crisis as its loan repayments this year exceed its earthquake assistance. Political battles or epidemics or migration may open new fronts. But recreation returns. Kathmandu Living Lab, which has been instrumental in getting open source maps of terrain and needs to rescue operations, posted on Friday a [picture](#) of part of their team playing Futsal to de-stress.

The decisions during an earthquake and its aftermath for people, including the privileged like Professor B, are manifold: whether to stay or go abroad; how much risk to expose oneself to; how to balance family and professional life; how much one's body and emotions can safely bear; how to navigate corruption and deception as these arise; how to foster and appreciate people's generosity and gritty determination, in short how to bear fruit from one's own small branch in the larger context. At every point, if one wishes to abide in God's love, to be grounded in prayer, reaching out to others fruitfully, this requires a lightfooted dexterity, an avid flexibility of prayer and wisdom, not a long bath.

On 28 April, three days after the earthquake, Pope Francis gave a morning meditation on the need for Christians to be 'Open to Surprises'. Citing Peter's decision to baptise the Gentiles in today's epistle, he observed that the early Christians "didn't understand that God is the God of newness". Francis suggested that to abide in God, we must "to pray... 'Lord, give us the Holy Spirit, that we may discern in every moment what we have to do'". He

swiftly clarified, this “doesn’t mean always repeating the same thing. The message is the same: but ...the Church goes forth with these surprises, with this newness of the Holy Spirit”. So the skills required to abide in God as people of Love during an earthquake and its aftermath may be relevant for each of us. As we seek to abide during less dramatic and yet no less dynamic situations the same questions arise: where to live; how to balance personal and professional life; how to nurture body and emotions; how to navigate office politics and celebrate others’ accomplishments, how to bear fruit from one’s own small branch in the larger context.

But of course, the situation in Nepal is real and ongoing, and in Christian Aid week, our own response from the sidelines to this particular situation comes into view.

Last Friday night the flight from Geneva was full of suits and briefcases, the international agency commuters coming home for the weekend. The boarding process was silent and efficient and we left 10 minutes early. At the end of the flight, the collection of spare change was requested, with a note that today the charity had been changed to support the Nepal earthquake. What was striking was how many blue and grey suits, with quiet dignity, slipped little envelopes into the stewardess’ tray. They may not have held much in terms of cash value – a token gesture in some ways. Yet the gifts signified a movement of heart, a spaciousness of care, a willingness to respond in the moment, even though they knew their gift would not alone be enough.

Many of those here present, may be more like the Geneva commuters than the monk’s remote villagers or even Professor B. Yet today with Nepal and Christian Aid week, and in our lives, let us seek to deeply engage our Lord’s invitation:

*I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...
...abide in my love.*