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Loving What we Cannot Understand : Camus' "The Plague" and the Tsunami

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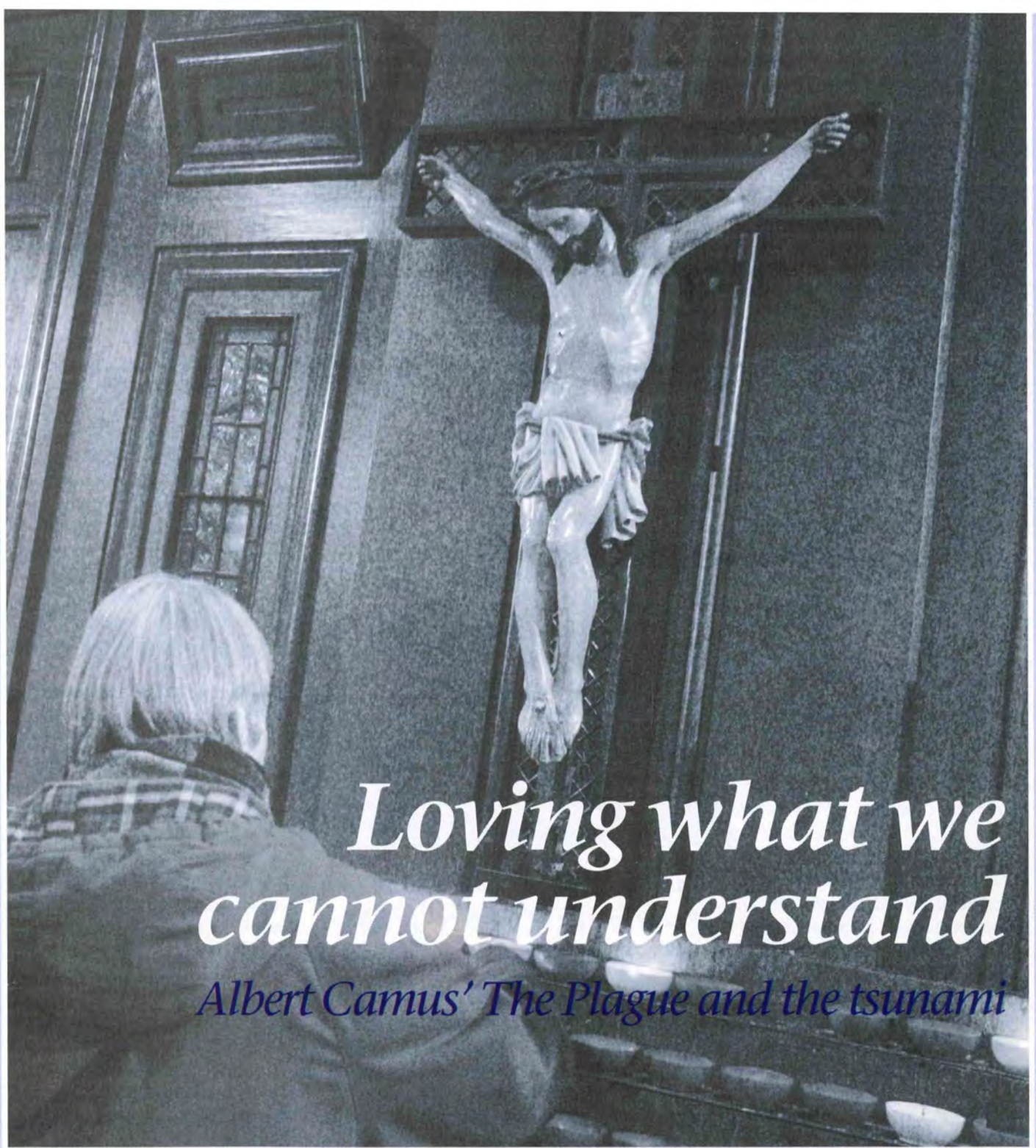
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Loving what we cannot understand

*Albert Camus' **The Plague** and the tsunami*

*Albert Camus' classic novel **The Plague** raises many of the questions about God and his role in the world that were asked following the St Stephen's Day tsunami that killed more than 250,000 in South East Asia. It may also help us explore an answer, writes **Eamon Maher***

Ever since the dreadful tsunami struck South East Asia, there has been an outpouring of grief, anger and debate in the print media over how an all-loving God could permit such an atrocity. Patsy McGarry, in a piece in *The Irish Times* (January 1&3, 2005) which attests to his feelings of despair at the time of its composition, asked a few hard-hitting questions: "Where is the God of love in all of this? What have those who apologise for Him to say now?"

McGarry was putting forward the argument that God should somehow inter-

vene in human existence, a thesis that has no theological basis of which I am aware. Through the incarnation, Christians believe that God became man, and was made to suffer the pain and indignity that are part of the human condition. God did not intervene to stop the death of Christ, just as he remained silent when millions of people were killed in two world wars and in the vicious acts of genocide that were the particular hallmark of the 20th century.

Unlike McGarry, a journalist for whom I have respect, I did not question the existence of God any more than usual as

a result of the disaster that befell the people that were submerged in what he terms "that unmerciful baptism on December 26th."

Which is not to say that the event left me indifferent. As Brendan Ó Cathaoir wrote, again in *The Irish Times*, on 17 January:

"It is part of the Christian tradition that innocent suffering redeems evil. Whenever we pray on behalf of others we in some measure put ourselves in their place. In Gethsemane, Christ takes the place of all creation."

Such a sentiment is intellectually more satisfying than McGarry's heart-rending reaction to what was a disaster of major proportions. The emotion stems from the humanity of someone who can't reconcile a terrible event such as the tsunami with the image of a compassionate God. And he's right also in his distrust of "lofty theologians striving for perfect symmetry in the geometry of their doctrines," who might come up with a rational explanation of "the problem."

Masterpiece

In the midst of all this debate surrounding God and his role in the affairs of man, I am surprised not to have seen any reference to Camus' masterpiece, *The Plague*, which tackles issues of a similar nature. Published in 1947 after World War II had come to an end, it is set in the African city of Oran, described as being quite similar to a typical Western city. What is unusual about it, however, is the absence of any pigeons, trees or gardens. The inhabitants work hard, always with a view to getting rich, and their love-making is inspired by simple lust or else is reduced to a meaningless act indulged in out of habit.

It is not a city where it is advisable to fall ill, because if you do, you will find yourself very alone very quickly. People are too busy to think seriously about death: the spectre of it is enough to make them uneasy. Camus' sketch of Oran and its inhabitants sets the scene well for what is to unfold. They are a hedonistic and self-absorbed group, living with thoughts only of how to satisfy their

India: calm seas after the devastation of the tsunamis



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various needs. God plays little or no role in their existence.

But then rats begin to die in apartment blocks, and later they can be seen writhing in agony on the streets in their hundreds. The rats are the victims of a strange disease that causes them to die a horrible and gruesome death. After a while, some of the inhabitants are infected by the same 'plague' and gradually the authorities have no option other than to order that the city be cordoned off because of what is clearly an epidemic. No one is allowed in or out of the city limits.

Paralysed by fear

It is in times of crisis that people discover

what sort of character and backbone they possess. As the death toll from the plague starts to increase, people either find the courage and energy to combat it or are paralysed by fear and inertia. Most of the inhabitants of Oran fall into the latter category. At first, they refuse to accept that the plague is happening, and when they finally realise the extent of the problem, they do everything in their power to avoid becoming infected.

The hero of the novel, Dr Rieux, is a man of science whose role he believes consists of seeking a cure to the disease and making the sick as comfortable as he can. When he is asked by his friend, Tarrou, why he doesn't believe in God, he replies "that if he believed in an all-powerful God, he would stop curing patients, and leave that task to the Almighty."

This view closely resembles that of Camus himself who was not interested in doctrines, dogmas or systems but rather in finding a reason to continue living in the midst of despair. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, he said that the only real moral question Man needed to ask himself was why he shouldn't commit suicide. In 1943, he noted that his difficulty with Christianity was that it was built on 'a doctrine of injustice.' He added: "I am not a philosopher. I do not believe enough in reason to believe in any system. What interests me is how a man can carry on when he doesn't have faith in God or reason." He

noted that revolt has at its origin a reaction against the notion of a god-creator who is responsible for all things. *The Plague* is essentially the dramatisation of this idea.

Some sort of punishment

While Rieux seeks a scientific/medical solution to the crisis in Oran, the Jesuit priest, Fr Paneloux, sees the plague as some sort of punishment visited by God on the city for turning its back on religion. Not surprisingly, people begin to flock back to the churches when they become fearful of what lies in store for them. The authorities organise a week of prayer, the highlight of which is Paneloux's first sermon, which begins

with the following lines: "My friends, you are in a fix. My friends, you deserve it!"

A well-respected scholar and orator, Paneloux sees the plague as an opportunity to bring people back to God. He cites many examples from the Old Testament to illustrate how God's anger took the form of famine, plague and floods. Because they had adopted a libertine lifestyle and abandoned all religious observance, the inhabitants of Oran had brought disaster on themselves. They needed now to show God that they were repentant and willing to change the error of their ways.

Many listening to him find Paneloux's argument irrefutable. Rieux, however, is not convinced. He does not see the plague as a punishment and certainly does not believe that its antidote will be found in religion. He chooses instead to work harder and to find a cure through scientific means.

The contrast in the approach of Rieux and Paneloux forms the main dynamic of the book. For all that the Jesuit is an intelligent and honourable man, he doesn't carry the same moral authority as Rieux. The doctor must struggle with the ravages of the disease on a constant basis. He is present when people take their last breath; he witnesses their contorted faces, smells their diseased bodies, signs their death certificates. And all this time, he feels helpless. Still he keeps up his struggle even when it appears to him that the situation is hopeless.

Key moment

The death of the Othon boy is perhaps the key moment in the novel. This child was at an advanced stage when Rieux decided that they had nothing to lose by trying out a serum that was not as of yet fully tested. At first, the child shows signs that he might be recovering but in the end all the serum succeeds in doing is prolonging his agony.

A group of people gather round his bedside, including Paneloux and Rieux. The doctor hears the priest plead with God to save the child and notes his anguish at hearing the angry death-rattle that emanates from the shrivelled shell that is the child's body. Angrily, he turns to the priest and says: "That child was innocent and you know it!" The priest has no come-back to such an onslaught. Earlier, the doctor had stated: "Maybe

God is better off that we don't believe in him and that we struggle with all our might against death without once raising our eyes towards heaven where he observes our efforts in silence."

We're back to the crux of the matter: What role, if any, does God play in the affairs of the world? An atheist like Rieux seems justified in his view that religious faith can be an excuse for people to do nothing other than wait for an intervention that is not forthcoming. How often do mystics rail in a similar fashion against God's silence? How often do they doubt his very existence when so much directs them to anger and despair?

Importance of suffering

In *The Rebel*, Camus observed that for God to be Man required that he experience despair: "He would have had to endure very little agony if there was always in the background the certainty of eternal happiness." Camus understood the importance of suffering in the Christian context because the incarnation means that Jesus knew what it was to be abandoned, alone, in pain and doubt. Humanity implies fragility, mortality, a lack of understanding of the will of God. Faced with the desolation felt by all at the child's death, Paneloux says these insightful words to Rieux: "Maybe, just maybe, we have to love what we cannot understand."

After witnessing the horror of the child's death, the Jesuit priest in his next sermon shows how this event has affected him. He states that while people may quite easily find justification for the striking down of a libertine, it is impossible to find any reason whatever why a child should be made to suffer. He urges the congregation to accept the limits of human reason, and ends with this exhortation: "My brothers and sisters, the time has come. We need to believe in or deny everything. And who among us would dare to deny everything?"

He puts forward a version of the Pascalian wager here. By believing in nothing, we stand to lose nothing. But by believing in God, we could win eternal happiness. Paneloux's death, though far from exemplary, nevertheless shows him holding on steadfastly to his faith. To Rieux's question if there is anything he can do to help, the priest replies: "No, thank you. Priests have no friends – they

have placed all their love in God." He then asks to be given the crucifix, which he clasps to his chest. It's almost as though he wants to remind himself that the Christian path has to involve suffering, because of the example of its founder.

At the end of *The Plague*, the gates of the city re-open and the inhabitants seem anxious to dispel from their minds the harrowing experience they have been through. Rieux discovers that his wife has died at the sanatorium where he sent her before the outbreak of the plague. He has also lost his dear friend Tarrou who sought to find a way of becoming a saint without believing in God. Rieux admits to having little taste for heroism or sanctity. What interests him is how to be a man.

The reasons for God's silence

By raising such issues in his novel, Camus showed himself to be aware of how difficult it is to supply definitive answers for the problems that life throws at us. The novel ends on a reasonably upbeat note when Rieux acknowledges that there are more things to admire than to disdain in mankind.

In spite of his atheism, Camus remained attached to the sacred, noble and courageous side of the universe. He wasn't afraid to question or to admit to not being able to find adequate answers to his interrogations. He would be very comfortable with the manner in which the French priest-writer, Jean Sulivan urges us to be wary of applying facile terms to describe the unknowable God: "The word 'God', so impoverished and second-rate, as common as grass, bread or wine, has been congealed into an idea – the big boss, a slogan to put on bumper-stickers. What does it matter? God is the silence of every word. How can he avoid being absent? There is no other way of extending the limits of human ability."

When events that surpass human comprehension like the recent tsunami occur, it may be wise not to ask where God is in the midst of all the confusion, but rather to understand the reasons for his silence. His absence clears the way for people like Rieux to alleviate suffering and for others to take his place on the Cross. In the end, it all boils down to 'loving what we cannot understand.' 🌱