

What Would Jesus Do About the Gulf Oil Disaster? June 2010

On April 20, 2010 an oil rig a mile deep in the Gulf of Mexico owned by the British Petroleum Company exploded killing 11 men and unleashing an oil gusher that is still uncapped. It is estimated that about 1 million gallons of oil are being released each day. Already this disaster surpasses the Exxon Valdez oil spill which unloaded 11 million gallons of oil into the Prince William Sound off the coast of Alaska in 1989. Modern technology and the internet enables anyone to watch a live feed of the gusher, spewing oil out with a counter indicating the rate of expulsion. It makes your stomach churn to watch it for just a few moments. An oil slick has developed over the Gulf of Mexico more than half the size of the state of North Carolina. Oil globs have reached the gulf shore in Louisiana and there is a chance the gulf stream will carry this oil slick around the coast of Florida and up the Eastern seaboard. Historians and scientists are predicting this will be the largest environmental disaster in the history of America.

Many conversations are taking place these days. Who is to blame? How can we stop the flow of oil? What are the fishermen of the Gulf going to do? How will this affect the President's plan to expand offshore oil drilling? The question that comes to my mind is, "What would Jesus do?" Or, said another way, "What is a Christian response to this environmental disaster?"

An easy answer might be that Jesus would simply raise his hand and heal the Gulf, close the gusher, and send everyone home amazed at his power. The story of Jesus calming the waters while on a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee could be used to support this position. Certainly, Jesus could do that if he wanted. But Jesus has not intervened so directly since he returned to his father almost 2000 years ago. He most often works through people to accomplish his purposes.

Barring such miracle, what would Jesus have us do? We cannot undo history. We can't go backwards and prevent this disaster from happening. So what could a Christian response be?

I believe it has to start with a reassertion of our responsibility as Christians to be good stewards of the earth. Indeed, not only Christians, but all human beings have been given the responsibility to be good stewards of the earth. The first chapter of Genesis affirms our call as human beings to "rule over...all the earth."

Now there are good rulers and there are bad rulers. Good rulers rule on behalf of those ruled. Bad rulers rule for the benefit of themselves. If we are going to be good rulers we are going to have to shift our thinking. We are going to have to begin thinking about how our consumption decisions are affecting the fish, the birds, and all the earth, i.e., the ruled. The argument that "people need jobs" being our first priority is ultimately counterproductive and destructive. We are seeing how many people can lose their jobs when we elevate our unlimited appetite for oil above the need to rule over the creation on behalf of the creation. This is the only planet we have. We will continue to make disastrous stewardship decisions if we have the mentality that job production trumps environmental impact.

I contend we have framed the question backwards for too long. We have tried to create as many jobs and make as much profit as possible while having an environmental impact study to forecast the effects on the earth. We need to start doing the reverse. We need to protect the only environment we have and then

have an economic impact study to see what kinds of jobs we can produce and what kind of profits we can make in that context.

In this particular case, it would mean that any oil company that wants to drill on land or sea must have a plan in place to cover any contingency in which the oil spills, oil lines break, or some major disruption takes place. BP had no serious plan and no government required them to have one. Furthermore, there must be a contingency fund created from the oil profits to be deposited into a national disaster fund in preparation for such a disaster. This contingency fund will need to have a stronger "lockbox" than our social security fund which has been raided too easily to meet our consumption desires. This plan will raise the price of oil and gas in our country, no doubt. It will make the cost of doing business more expensive in the short run. Better to plan ahead and save for an "oily day" than destroy our environment for the sake of cheaper gas and greater short-term profits.

Can I say, "Thus sayeth the Lord"?

Maybe not, but somebody better speak up soon. This is what I sayeth.