



The rising water

Typhoon Ondoy Floods **Manila**

Matthew Gamston



Feeding Centre in San Mateo

When she first approached me I thought she was a bit weird. I was waiting at the bus station in Baguio, heading back to Manila shortly after the first typhoon had struck. The lady asked me some questions about the sacks of blankets I was carrying and then told me she had just come from Manila and that her husband had rescued her in the floods. I guess she was still in shock. And after reaching Manila and seeing some of the damage, well, there was plenty for her to be in shock about.

Typhoon Ondoy hit the Philippines on Saturday 26th September. At least three hundred people were killed and for a time nearly a million were displaced or homeless. Ondoy dropped more water on Manila than Katrina did on New Orleans, flooding 80% of Metro Manila.

Calamities like these often bring out the best and worst in people. Amid the few sad tales of looting there were numerous stories of heroism and hundreds were saved by the bravery of others. A brother of Pastor Ishmael swam round rescuing children from the roofs of two-storey buildings. He sat one child at a time in a metal basin and pulled himself along using the electricity wires in water twenty feet deep. Sadly there are a number of heartbreaking stories of brave people who drowned whilst trying to save others.

Perhaps in most western countries it's the

Wrecked homes in Fairview



rich who live near the rivers. Here in Manila it is mainly the poor, and millions have legally and illegally built their shacks there. The floods came fast and the currents were strong. People were swept away, houses were flattened and possessions disappeared into the murky waters.

The response – Overall there has been an amazing response of concern and generosity by millions across this country and from abroad as well. But the damage done and the sheer number of people affected are so enormous that a massive humanitarian response is required. The scale of the need is overwhelming and turning up with aid in desperately needy areas is not always wise. Occasionally there have been riots due to people being desperate for food and supplies.



Matthew preaching in San Mateo

We are extremely grateful to all those who have responded prayerfully and financially over the last couple of weeks. As usual Christian Compassion Ministries and Cubao Reformed Baptist Church have been doing a fantastic job. Having social workers based in many of the worst hit communities in our immediate area has meant that the response can be measured, informed and controlled.

I've been concentrating on helping in places outside of Cubao and aiming to get money into the hands of churches to help their members and nearby communities. In **San Pedro** I was able to spend a day with the church as they cooked hot meals and distributed bags of groceries. A week later we went back to one of the communities and gave hot meals, groceries and school supplies for the children, and I had the opportunity to preach a fifteen minute gospel presentation.

In **San Mateo** where Pastor Ismael's family live, the whole place was completely flooded. The damage was just breathtaking; it looked like a war zone. People had lost all their possessions and what remained was covered in thick mud. Ismael and his family had done a good job handing out tickets to those in need, and on the day we were able to preach briefly to around three hundred people before giving out bags of groceries, hot meals and some blankets.

In **Fairview** CCM has a training centre and just a short walk away hundreds of families live near the creek. The whole area was completely devastated. Last week we cooked a hot meal and gave bags of groceries to a hundred families as well as preaching a short gospel message. And two days ago we repeated it with a hundred families from the other side of the creek.

The next step – The initial response has been food, water, blankets etc., but over the next few weeks much more will be required. It's a difficult balance as the government are saying they want to move many illegal squatters away from the rivers so we have to be careful not to cause tension in how we help. But obvious priorities are helping families replace lost possessions, build homes again and find a livelihood.

The lessons –

In the Philippines – There have been various discussions in the media about why the flooding was so bad. One newspaper article was entitled 'not an act of God but a sin.' Too much of the country has been turned into concrete, too much of the drainage system clogged with rubbish and too many trees been cut down leading to floods and landslides. A combination of a freak amount of rainfall, irresponsible urbanisation and far too many people

in Metro Manila all contributed to the disaster.

Personally – A few things have struck me over the last few weeks. I've been convicted again by how much pride there is in my own life. Opportunities to do good to others can so easily turn into good deeds to be seen by others. A few times recently I've searched inside to examine if my motives are truly to serve God, serve others or just serve myself. And in the mixed up sinful mess of my own heart with the constant battle between the old and the new, I'm sure all three are in there somewhere.

More positively we are so grateful at how many churches abroad have given so quickly and so generously. The vast majority of aid we have been able to give has been paid for by you, so thank you!

Last Friday in Fairview we were very short of volunteers - only five of us trying to organise help for over a hundred people. But three of the five were former street people converted after coming to the drop-in centre! It was such a blessing to see former recipients of help now helping others, which is what Christianity is all about: people receiving mercy, and then showing it.

The bigger picture – Taking a step back I was struck again at how messed up our world is. The sheer devastation and suffering caused by these typhoons is mind-blowing. It's not often the Philippines makes headline news on the BBC website. Yet within a few days we had been replaced by news of hundreds killed in a tsunami and thousands buried in an Indonesian earthquake.

In San Mateo I preached to nearly three hundred people who had lost everything, but in some ways it wasn't hard to know what to say. In wrestling with the mess of the world and the seeming silence and passiveness of God I've been so helped by Romans 5:8, so every time I got the chance to preach I used that text. There is so much we don't understand, but we can know this: God has demonstrated his love for us in the most amazing way. The Son of God descending into the mess of our world, living and suffering alongside the creatures he had made, before hanging on a cross, abandoned by His Father and the world. For all the things I don't know, I do know that it is good news that brings hope even in the midst of the most serious tragedy and suffering.



Damage in St. Mateo

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8

Rubbish piled in the streets



What was left when the water subsided

