

On 3rd April, *The Daily Telegraph*, headlined an article with the words:

Religious leaders confess they are struggling to answer the question: ‘Why is God letting this happen?’

In a Zoom-hosted chat between Christian and Jewish faith leaders, the leaders praised technology for allowing people to remain connected during the current Covid-19 pandemic and discussed a range of philosophical and religious dilemmas.

For some weeks now, all religious buildings in the UK have been ordered to close their doors under government guidelines, and so, much of the celebration of Passover and Easter will have to take place online.

As the conversation between Cardinal Nichols, Archbishop Welby and Chief Rabbi Mirvis continued, it was Cardinal Nichols, who revealed something of the toll that the pandemic was taking on religious leaders, saying that he was “struggling” to answer questions about the role of God in times of crisis:

“I do, I must admit”, he said, “sometimes struggle with people's question of ‘where is God in all of this?’ ‘Why is God letting this happen?’”

That twin question of ‘where is God in all of this?’ ‘Why is God letting this happen?’” is often on people’s lips: where was God at Auschwitz or in the Coptic Church bombed in Alexandria on Palm Sunday a few years ago? Where was God when Syrian

men women and children were being gassed in Idlib or the Tutsi being slaughtered in Rwanda?

Where is God in the lives of an almost endless list of families and towns and villages and nations and continents when horrible things are witnessed - and where the most dreadful things happen?

On Good Friday, Jesus hangs upon the Cross of Calvary and God, in Christ, on behalf of mankind, on behalf of all that is, utters to God his, and our echoing, aching, despairing, questioning, cry of *“Where are you God in all of this?”*

So where *is* God in this? Where is God in the Covid-19 pandemic? Where is God in the genocides and torture and disease and pain of our world?

What, if anything, can the journey from the cross erected on Golgotha on Good Friday to the empty tomb of today, tell us about where God is?

What Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, who had, almost without exception, abandoned their friend and teacher, came to discover through three awful agonizing days, was this: even when evil and darkness and death seem to triumph, God is revealed - not as an absent onlooker - but as the unceasingly abiding presence which holds everything that is - in being.

That God is not an external, impotent onlooker – but is in each and every situation of awfulness and despair with us – especially when those moments are at their darkest and when everything seems lost.

Mary Magdalene and the other disciples discover on that first Easter Day – the first Day of God’s New Creation - that the

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob does not retreat to the safety of the side-lines, looking-on unmoved, like some disinterested spectator, but that God is intimately, inextricably present in every moment; that God is alongside his people whenever and wherever even the most unimaginable wicked and perverse, life denying things are perpetrated.

Christians down through the centuries, from the moment when the tomb that had held Jesus' lifeless body was found to be empty, have come to understand that even in, perhaps most especially in, the times of deepest darkness, unimaginable despair and searing pain, God does not *abandon* his people, but *is there with and alongside his people*; that God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who through the incarnation of his Eternal Word became man, is always and forever, everywhere throughout his creation, the God-who-is-Emmanuel, the God-who-is-with-us; the God who is not immune from the suffering of creation; the God who bears our suffering within himself where alone it can find meaning and resolution, wholeness and healing.

Christians down through the centuries have come to believe, along with Mary Magdalene and Peter and John, that even the darkest horror, the deepest despair, the most life-changing situation can be opened to God's redeeming, reconciling and recreative love because of the three days spanning Good Friday and Easter; that the boundless activity of God sets no limits on its own transformative self-giving.

God does not coerce or pre-plan or predetermine his creation, but creation is therefore and always will be laden with the

inherent risk of what it means to be free, to have Freewill, to go its own way, however painful the results.

Some years ago now, the Christian priest and writer W H Vanstone wrote this:

If creation is the work of love, its 'security' lies not in its conformity to some predetermined plan, but in the unsparing love which will not abandon a single fragment of it, and man's assurance must be the assurance not that 'all that happens is determined by God's plan' but, rather, 'that all that happens is encompassed by God's love'.ⁱ

Easter Day is the eternal proof, revealed in time and place, that all things, every thing and every one, are embraced by God's love; that despair can, through God, be transformed into hope; that darkness can become light, that sorrow can be transfigured into joy, that death, because of today, will always give way to new and eternal life.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

ⁱ Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God, Vanstone, W H, 1977, pp.65-65