

26th May 'Comfort my People'

WHERE HAS GOD BEEN IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

The weight of suffering in this pandemic, so far concentrated in half a dozen populations (e.g., USA, England, Italy, Spain, Brazil, France), leads many people to reflect on their belief (or non-belief) in God.

If God is good and powerful, how can God allow this pandemic, the ones beforehand and those yet to appear, to wreak so much suffering on simple people?

If God is all wise, is God teaching humanity a lesson, or lessons, through this anxious and painful experience?

If God is all just, can it be that God is punishing the world for its sins?

Perhaps the best response to such questions is to hear God's response to Job in his anguish: 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?' God responds. 'Tell me if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions?' (Jb 38:4-5)

During the course of the pandemic, many essays have grappled with these questions.

We experience evil, which is aptly defined as the absence of good, as physical evil in events that we consider as flaws in nature (sickness, death; tsunamis, earthquakes, storms uncontrolled fire and flood; all kinds of physical forces that injure human beings (some manifestations of gravity and mass; of chemicals; of uncontained electricity and gas). However, this way of interpreting these events has been greatly modified as our scientific knowledge has grown. Even so, questions about God's goodness, providence, power and wisdom are felt.

We experience evil as a personal assault when moral evil targets us. This can be the consequences of our own sins, or injustices and violence perpetrated upon us. Christians draw our moral compass from the Scriptures, as well as through reasonable moral reflection. The examples of what seems to be chastisement for sin in Scripture can confuse us, despite the overwhelming weight of God's revealing himself as a God of love.

A subset of both physical and moral evil in the Scriptures is the violent events and attitudes frequently described.

I do not intend to make an original contribution to reflection, though my plan is to offer each day for two or three weeks an extract of about 300 words by several authors who have published their thoughts in recent months. Even this may be too ambitious, as a theologian from Wales warned: 'it is easy for us to add to the evil in the world by the ways in which we discuss it.'