

18. Where was God?

2 Corinthians 5:19

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled himself to us through Christ and gave us a ministry of reconciliation: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Like many others, I was helped by the words of the Bishop of Carlisle at the service of remembrance held in St. Nicholas' Gardens on the Sunday after the shootings. He addressed the question head on: Where was God?

Bishop James pointed out that we could see God's presence in the caring arms of the paramedics, in the skill of the doctors and in the care and commitment of ordinary passers-by.

The First World War was a big turning point in the development of theology. The chaplains serving in the trenches were confronted forcefully with the question, where is God *now*? Taking their inspiration from the suffering of Christ on the cross they began to see God present in the experiences of the injured and suffering.

Perhaps they were inspired partly by Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). There we discover that we encounter Jesus in our poor and suffering brothers and sisters.

These ideas have their place as part of an answer to the question. But they are incomplete because they fail to address the most pressing issue: where was God when the gun was fired? Was he in any sense present *then*?

It's very tempting to say "no". If God was absent in those terrible moments, it is easier for us to distance him from what happened.

But to deny his presence in these terrible moments is to jump from the frying pan into the fire. If God is absent, then evil has free reign. If he is absent, then history is not in his hands after all. But if he is always present, always at work, then nothing is irredeemable. Everything will be proved meaningful one day.

Saying that God was present does not mean that he is the perpetrator of evil. He hates evil and has no part in it. But for reasons we will grasp one day, he permits it *within* his rule and works good things through it.

On this subject there are many matters we don't understand and we have to live with tensions. But what we do understand is this: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ".

God's presence was most powerfully revealed in Christ's cross in precisely the moment when he appeared most absent. This inspires hope that his hidden presence at every moment is able to bring good out of anything.