

# Violence

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## *and the promise of God*

### Chaos | Suffering | Belief

*How can we believe in a God of love and justice when every night we confront such heartbreaking pictures of death and destruction on the news? Join Br. Geoffrey Tristram on this inspiring journey from despair to hope, as he learns how even small shifts can pave the way to meaningful change in this broken, aching world of ours, and in our own broken, aching hearts.*

**It was over fifty years ago.** I was a child, but I still remember the week when it all started. Sitting in front of the television I watched the scenes of mangled buildings, ambulance sirens, dead bodies. The armed conflict, the “Troubles,” had begun in Northern Ireland. I didn’t quite understand what was going on, but I knew there were two sides, Republicans and Loyalists, sometimes called Catholics and Protestants, and they seemed to hate each other. And for the whole of the rest of my life in England, virtually every news program, every day, featured the Troubles. Every Sunday in church, for decades, we would “pray for peace in Northern Ireland. We pray for peace.”

The Troubles were for me a daily reminder of a world in chaos. Why did God allow such suffering, such bloodshed? What was the point of praying for peace? As I write these words in April 2023, Joe Biden is in Ireland, as part of the twenty-fifth anniversary commemorations of the Good Friday Agreement, which was signed on April 10, 1998, and which heralded the end of the Troubles. After so many long years of violence, and despite the sporadic signs of continued conflict, there is now much hope for a lasting peace and reconciliation. It perhaps makes one nod in agreement with those famous words, memorably quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Yet there are countless men, women, and children whose lives have been forever shattered by those years of conflict, and who live with the dreadful consequences of loss and bereavement. How can we as Christians hold together a belief in a just and loving God, when throughout the world today we continue to see such suffering, cropping up in fresh conflicts every year?

Shortly after I was ordained, I started to struggle with this very question. How could I, with integrity, preach about a God of love and justice when every night I watched

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heartbreaking pictures of death and destruction on the news? And it was not just Northern Ireland. It seemed that the chaos of war and brokenness extended right across the globe. In the Book of Genesis, God too seemed to notice this, for "he saw that the earth had become corrupt, and was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11). In my prayers I said rather angrily to God: "Well you made the earth God, so what are you going to do about it?" By way of reply, God, who rather scarily likes to answer our prayers, led me into the very heart of the violence! My bishop wrote to me and asked me to join a group of youth leaders who were organizing summer camps for both Catholic and Protestant young people from inner-city Belfast. So we flew to Belfast, and our first task was recruitment: we went into Catholic and Protestant schools, we met students, and we invited them to share a holiday with other students whom they would normally never have met, and whom they often either feared or despised. Some of them were suspicious, and said, "No!" And I soon found out why. I had never seen such a divided and polarized society! There was an invisible line right through the city; cross that road, and you were in Republican territory; cross that street, and the ubiquitous graffiti told you that you had entered a Loyalist street. The children either went to a state high school if they were Protestants, or, if Catholics, to a separate, parochial school. Separate schools, separate sports centers, separate shops, separate lives. Young people, growing up, never met young people on the other side. Ever. Ignorance of the other led to fear, and then to hatred. Gangs would roam the streets stopping strangers and asking if they were Catholic or Protestant, and God help them if they gave the wrong answer. (The people of Belfast did, though, have a great sense of humor and were incredibly kind. They would relate the humorous, yet telling anecdote of the Indian who was stopped on the street and asked, "Are you Catholic or Protestant?" He answered, "I am a Hindu." To which they replied, "Yes, but are you a Catholic Hindu or a Protestant Hindu?")

To bring these young people from such a divided society out into the countryside to attempt to spend two weeks together was a risky experience. For most of them, it was the first time they had ever spoken to someone from "the other side." At first, kids from the two schools would stare at each other with a mixture of hostility and curiosity. But then, slowly, they began to talk and share with each other, to have fun together at the swimming pool, to discuss their experiences and learn from each other, to organize birthday parties, to pray together, to fall in love with each other. Their lives were changed, and so was mine. I believe that, by the grace of God, our summer camps made a difference, however small, to the conflict, and helped mend some of the brokenness.

The experience of those camps made an enormous difference to me. Before I went to Northern Ireland, I was angry with God and demanded to know how God was going to mend the chaos and violence of the world that God had created. I suppose I wanted God to come down in power and glory and suddenly make everything alright - a kind of *deus ex machina*! But during those years in Northern Ireland, I realized that that is not how God works. God prefers to use us, to work with us, to bring healing and reconciliation into our broken world. In a small way, God used those summer holidays, which we organized with immense care and with lots of faith, and then worked with us through them to change lives. This was the most important lesson I learned from Northern Ireland, which I believe is of fundamental importance for each of us who seek to follow Jesus and who long to help mend God's broken world. It is a truth expressed so memorably by Saint Augustine in words which are very close to my heart: "Without God we cannot. Without us God will not."

I encountered during my sojourn in Northern Ireland so many men and women who were doing heroic work of reconciliation. They often took huge risks, putting themselves in personal danger, crossing lines to try to mend what was broken. In particular, I have huge admiration for two seemingly ordinary women, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire, who together started a peace movement, "The Peace People," which inspired men and women from both sides of the conflict to demonstrate against violence and terrorism. After six months, the violence had declined by 70%. Williams and Maguire won the Nobel Peace Prize for this remarkable achievement. All these years later, as I watch the ceremonies to mark the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, I think of such courageous men and women with great thanksgiving. God was working with them and through them. Just one person filled with courage, faith, and valor can not just make a difference, but can turn the world upside down. And that person could easily be us! Each one of us can make a difference. Each one of us can light a candle to help lighten the darkness. Even small things (like a simple, two-week summer camp) can make a huge difference.

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My three years working amidst the Troubles helped me to preach again with integrity. I learned that God is not absent from the chaos, but is right in the middle of it. God was there, without any doubt, fully present and working with and through men and women of good will, to bring healing and hope. God is not a *deus ex machina*, who enters the scene with an explosion of power to make everything better. That is not how God works. In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius of Loyola describes God rather as a *deus operarius*, which means a God who is "working" or "laboring." David Fleming SJ writes, "God is an active God. He is ever 'at work' (*operarius*) in people's lives, inviting, directing, guiding, proposing, suggesting." I saw this time and again. I witnessed Christ's presence inspiring and guiding and strengthening those who gave their all. I saw it in their eyes and in their hearts. The way that God can work with us and through us is a great mystery, but for me it is beautifully expressed in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":

"for Christ plays in ten thousand places/lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his."

Newly ordained and faced with a world of chaos and violence, I spoke angrily to God: "You made the world, God. What are you going to do about it?" In truth I still feel anger and incomprehension at times. The ongoing sight of such pervasive human suffering still leaves me bewildered and silent. When I watch the news now and see the terrible suffering of the people of the Ukraine, when I hear the heartbreaking tally of victims of gun violence, when I see and feel all around me the consequences of our voracious abuse of the environment, it still leaves me feeling bewildered and silent. But that I can still preach about a God of love and justice is largely thanks to my time in Northern Ireland. I learned many things there, perhaps most fundamentally that I was asking God the wrong question: not, "What are *you* going to do about it?" but rather, "What are *we* going to do about it?"

Lord make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi.

# For Further Reflection

What worldly realities threaten your belief in a just, loving, and merciful God?

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What concrete step, however small, can you take toward meaningful change in that domain?

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When in your life have you met God right in the middle of the chaos?

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