

# Act of God?

A recent survey found that more people are praying during the lockdown, especially those in the 18-34 year old age group. Do they think a real, personal almighty God exists who can stop the corona virus plague? Do they think he caused it? Do they really believe in 'acts of God'?

In Old Testament stories God causes plagues, floods and other suffering. They are literally 'acts of God'. In the beginning (Genesis 3), when Eve and Adam eat from the tree of knowledge and become self-aware, God is jealous because 'they have become like one of us, knowing good and evil', so he throws them out of Eden. He says to Eve: 'In pain you will bring forth children' and to Adam: 'By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread.' They will both *labour* and it will be painful.

In the story of Noah, God is angry at human wickedness and sends a great flood, which kills everything except those in the ark: 'He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the Earth, human beings and animals ... Only Noah was left and those that were with him in the ark' (Gen 7: 21-22).

In the story of the 'Passover', God sends ten plagues on Egypt. For the tenth plague 'the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock' (Exodus 12: 29). Only the children of Israel were saved, who had smeared the blood of a lamb on their door.

In these stories God is a mass killer. It is essential that we should know that this God is *not real*. The mass killing in Britain and the rest of the world at the moment is *not* caused by a supernatural being but by the corona virus. The corona virus is invisible and very powerful but there is no point in praying to it, because it is not a person and cannot hear. There is no point in asking a supernatural person to stop the killing either, because there *are* no supernatural persons.

Plagues and floods have natural causes. I think now is the time for churches to recognise and say that. As well as hardship and disaster, there is so much good in the world, tremendous beauty, tremendous love and courage. It is right to praise all this, but let us praise it for itself, not some supernatural God for it. (In Paul's great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13, the word 'God' does not occur.)

Stevie Smith's poem 'Was He Married?' proceeds in the form of a dialogue, perhaps the poet's argument with herself:

'A god is Man's doll, you ass.  
He makes him up like this on purpose.

He might have made him up worse.

He often has, in the past.'

The questioner then asks about Jesus:

'To choose a god of love as he did and does  
Is a little move then?

Yes it is.

A larger one will be when men  
Love love and hate hate but do not deify them?

It will be a larger one.'

Nevertheless, imagination is vital to us as human beings. We need poetry and stories but also need to know when they are fictions. Stories of a supernatural realm are imaginary and part of our common treasury and tradition. They offer great richness and often contain wisdom. But we must learn how to sift them and read them for what they are, perhaps 'translate' them.

In our first article Stephen Mitchell does some of that translating and also urges that it is important to keep the stories. He reminds us that St Teresa of Avila said: 'Christ has no body now on Earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but

yours'. He says: 'from a Sofist point of view ... there is no God, there are no acts of God. Simple. Fine. But what is going to inspire us to bring good out of all things? What is going to inspire us to attempt to bring new life from the depths of insanity and darkness?' He concludes: 'We alone can recognise and eradicate these modern plagues. Our efforts must match the devotion and commitment of the religious believer.'

In our second article, 'The Great Flood', Dominic Kirkham recalls that before the corona virus the dominant 'act of God' was the flooding in Britain and elsewhere. He suggests: 'Our present predicament is perhaps nudging us to a renewed appreciation of our beginnings.' He looks back on the Babylonian story of the Great Flood and the adventures of Gilgamesh, written more than 1500 years before the flood story in Genesis, and explores how floods influenced the origins and spread of Western civilisation.

Patti Whaley introduces her article, 'Pie in the Sky when you Die', by saying: 'This article is more of a bottom-up approach – what do our chance remarks, popular songs, stories, and images tell us about we want from the afterlife, why do we want it, and does understanding this help us to live better lives?' Life after death is another 'act of God', in which we may not believe. But perhaps imagining a heaven and stories about it help us sort out what we want from our life on Earth – for ourselves and humanity as a whole.

The lockdown has made me think about what it would be like to be a disembodied soul in heaven. Traditionally, life in heaven is more blissful than on Earth, but I don't think I would enjoy being disembodied. Though Aquinas thought that the disembodied soul retained some kind of relationship to its former body, it was in

rather a scholastic way and would not be the same. I was reminded of this by Skype family meetings. At least we see each other, but you can't smell or touch, you can't hug or pat someone on the arm, or squash up on the sofa together. When I close the programme I get a feeling of desolation. I don't go for the religious idea that being 'spiritual' and 'detached' from the body is a higher state. I am glad that the core doctrine of Christianity is *embodiment* – incarnation – and the core of Jesus' gospel was a reign of kindness ('God') *on Earth*. One of the signs of that reign is healing.

Serious illness has often been in the past, and still is sometimes, interpreted as an 'act of God' or God's punishment. Again, it is very important to reject that idea. In the story of the man born blind in John's gospel (9: 2-3) his disciples ask Jesus: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus replies: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned.' In our fourth article, 'This is Going to Hurt', Bobbie Stephens-Wright gives an entertaining and brave account of how she has coped with a long-term debilitating illness, and struggled to live her life to the full. The illness was not an 'act of God'. There is no supernatural God to inflict disease or handicap. It has natural causes, which have to be dealt with and combatted as best we can. Bobbie tells her story of how she has tried to do this.

I am pleased to say this issue of *Sofia* has a good number of letters to the Editor. Please keep these coming. There are also the usual *Revisiting* column, reviews and John Pearson's inimitable *As I Please*. I hope you will find things to enjoy.

I would also like to thank our excellent printers, Imprint Digital in Devon, who are working either from home or socially distanced during the lockdown, and have carried on as usual to print our magazine.

