

Acts of God

Stephen Mitchell thinks about our situation with the corona virus.

In faith it's all or nothing. There are no half measures, nothing must be lukewarm, no one should sit on the fence. 'You are either for me or against me,' says Jesus and, at the end of the parable of the talents, he adds a stark warning: 'To everyone who has, more will be given. But from the one who has not, even what they have will be taken away.' The winner takes all.

Why? Because the Kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field, he says. The person who found it, hid it again, and in joy went and sold all that they had and bought that field. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life *for me* will find it.

So it is with acts of God. 'Could I have two thousand words, please,' asks the editor, 'on Acts of God – God, plagues and sickness, you know the sort of thing – from a 'SOFish' point of view?' My first thought is that I won't need two thousand words; ten will be more than sufficient. There is no such thing as an act of God. My second thought is that I'll need the whole magazine, for everything is an act of God. It's all or nothing.

Unfortunately, that will not satisfy the editor and it certainly wouldn't satisfy the minister who hosts a weekly bible study for President Trump's cabinet. He placed the blame for the coronavirus on gays and environmentalism. Zimbabwe's defence minister, it seems, would agree, describing Covid-19 as God's way of punishing the United States and other western countries for imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe.

No less a person than Kourtney Kardashian, the *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* star, says she believes that God is punishing the world with coronavirus 'for all the evil in the world'. She quotes a passage from 2 Chronicles chapter 7: 'Whenever I hold back the rain or send locusts to eat up the crops or send an epidemic on my people, if they pray to me and repent and turn

away from the evil they have been doing, then I will hear them in heaven, forgive their sins, and make their land prosperous again.' Closer to home the DUP councillor, John Carson, a representative for Ballymena, said the virus is God's judgment for the legalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland.



Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service clap for the NHS.
Photo: Oxfordshire County Council.

Thankfully, not everyone takes these claims seriously. The press described a pastor who dubbed the coronavirus an 'end-times plague' sent to punish Chinese communists, the parents of transgender children and 'sexually immoral' Americans as a 'crackpot' and his story as 'bizarre'. More drastic action was taken by the public prosecutor in Saudi Arabia, who ordered the arrest of four people for claiming that the spread of the corona virus is a 'punishment from Allah'.

All this would be mildly amusing were it not for the theological ignorance of many believers who allow such talk from their pastors to continue. Yet it ought to be abundantly clear that within the parameters of classical Christianity, talk of an act of God makes little sense. Aquinas, for example, said God is not a being that exists

but existence itself or, as we might loosely paraphrase, God is not alive like other living things, but life itself. Or God is not real but reality itself, not a being that acts but action itself.

One might well ask what sort of gobbledygook this is and what he meant by it. (But it is, incidentally, no more incomprehensible than some statements as to how the universe came to be: ‘One consequence of quantum mechanics’ uncertainty principle is that a vacuum cannot remain perfectly empty forever. Not only will particles pop in and out of existence without violating the laws of physics, they have to.’)

Aquinas is following the traditional Christian doctrine of God’s omnipresence – God is present everywhere and does not come and go, wait or act. God is more intimate with the life of the world than that. God is in all things as existence or life. Everything is utterly dependent upon God. A true traditional believer therefore will not try to distinguish between those acts which are of God and those that derive from other sources. Rather, they will ask ‘Where is God?’ in these circumstances.

Writing this on Good Friday, I am fully aware of the sceptics’ questions: What is good about Good Friday? How can a good God send his only child to be tortured and executed in such a barbarous way? How can the second person of the Trinity cry: ‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ and remain the Son of God?

These questions are the very start of the Christian pilgrimage: seeking to find God in all things, even in darkness and death. The history of the Christian atonement doctrine is that attempt to see God in the evil and abuse of humanity. On Easter Day, as on every Sunday in their communion liturgy, Christians express the ever-present hope: we give thanks and praise at all times and in all places.

Christians should also know that resurrection is not one defining act of God, wrought upon Jesus. It happens to us all. In talking of Jesus’ resurrection, it is not what happens to Jesus after his death that matters but what is manifest in his death. Resurrection is not something that happens after Good Friday but something glorious to be seen in the cross. So St Paul argues that followers of Christ were buried with him in

baptism and raised with him in faith. Live the risen life, he urges them.

When Christians hear their pastors crudely speaking of a punishment from God, they should respond with the prayer of St Teresa of Avila: ‘Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours.’ For whether in the destruction of life through the enemies of God’s people or through plague or pestilence, talk of God’s punishment is but the prophet’s call to repentance and a new way of life.

Those of us who see things from a Sofist point of view, may cast all this aside. 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? There should be common ground here between those of a Sofish persuasion and Christians.

For Don Cupitt, saying ‘Yes’ to life is almost a creed, and those who attempt ‘solar living’ try to accept all forms of life however difficult or painful. That is not a simple acceptance of life, with a shrug and a ‘C’est la vie!’. Of course that does not mean not trying to change things or lessening the pain. Part of the adventure of living is the exploration, wrestling with and embracing of all life. Faith in life, like all faith, is all or nothing.

At the time of writing, unless we are what are called ‘key workers’, most of us are hunkered down, helping to keep the coronavirus at bay and protecting the NHS. I’ve been re-reading several of Cupitt’s books including *Life Life* (Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa CA, 2003): a number of themes chimed with these ‘locked-in’ times, not least ‘Life has no outside’, as we are reminded in chapter 20:

‘In the past we saw the whole of our human life activity as both having and needing external validation either by tradition or by God. But all that is now at an end... It is as if the whole human life world is like a great iridescent bubble. We are all inside it. It floats free.’

In this serious and absurd situation, our challenge is to make life matter, to make everyone’s life important. And we do this knowing that our love

and investment in each other is not banked for immortality.

In 'lockdown', and for the time being, we are encouraged to live life to the full and put on a good show. So families make and post videos of their children or grandchildren at play. They broadcast themselves to keep in touch through Zoom and Facetime. They try to live simply and well. They step outside on a Thursday night to applaud NHS and other vital workers, and desperately try to help those isolated and lonely to feel as if they are sharing and participating in the life of the world.

For however much we remain in the bubble, we are aware of the darker side of this restricted existence: greater stress for those with mental health issues, greater risks for those suffering domestic abuse, separation from loved ones in residential homes or those approaching death, economic hardships for many. And when we ask why these things are happening, we don't look for answers or solutions beyond human life. All this we may see as a consequence of our behaviour as societies or individuals, but not as a divine judgement or punishment.

The ten plagues in the biblical saga, together with the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea are but the beginning of forty years living in isolation in the desert and a time of law and community making. We cannot expect anything different. Strengthening society, making life purposeful, living generously without resentment, and welcoming the stranger are all on the agenda now and beyond lockdown.

And which plagues haunt us? Here's a little exercise which Jewish Seder guests will be familiar with. List ten things that plague us and need to be tackled to set the world on the path to freedom. Perhaps they will be environmental challenges – deforestation, water pollution, habitat destruction, over-fishing and the like, or community inequalities – access to our criminal justice system, to shelter and affordable housing,



London Eye turns 'NHS blue' in support of the weekly Clap for Carers on Thursdays at 8 pm. Photo: [timeout.com](https://www.timeout.com)

world-wide affordable health care and food. Others will look to present day forms of slavery, and the production of goods like clothing, coffee, cotton and carpets through slave labour.

Here are four things that need addressing taken from *A Replacement for Religion* (The School of Life, London, 2019): perfectibility (the belief that perfection lies within our grasp); individualism (the modern stress on being able to achieve exceptional things rather than contentment with the ordinary); novelty (society assigning prestige to whatever happens to be new); meritocracy (the belief that a good society is a meritocratic one, which has the implication that those at the top deserve their success and those at the bottom theirs, adding to the burden of poverty the burden of failure).

We alone can recognise and eradicate these modern plagues. Our efforts must match the devotion and commitment of the religious believer. Some may be nervous of this commitment, and think the all-or-nothing nature of faith verges on fanaticism. But the fanatic is obsessed with one course of action and one aspect of life. Solar living finds nourishment for life in all things and all situations.

Stephen Mitchell is a retired priest and former chair of the SOF Steering Committee. His book *God in the Bath* was published by O Books (Winchester, 2006) and his *Past Perfect* by Christian Alternative (Winchester, 2018).