

AS THE virus crept up on us, I started reading Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. It is a kind of docudrama written in 1722 about the outbreak of the plague in London in 1665. So many of the trends that we are seeing in our current pandemic were evident then. Anxiety and fear stalked the streets, rumours and conspiracy theories abounded, and the poor and the homeless were hit far harder than the well-off: they had more cramped living conditions and fewer opportunities to escape.

A discordant note for the modern reader, however, is struck by the idea that the plague is the judgement of God upon a faithless people, and, equally, that its departure is due to the mercy and kindness of God. As the plague begins to dissipate, the author reflects that this release "was evidently from the same secret invisible hand of him that had at first sent this disease as a judgement upon us".

He presumably has in mind the Old Testament plagues that are also seen as visitations of God on a faithless people: an idea taken up in the collect for a time of plague in the Book of Common Prayer: "O Almighty God, who in thy wrath didst send a plague upon thine own people in the wilderness, for their obstinate rebellion against Moses and Aaron; and also, in the time of king David, didst slay with the plague of pestilence threescore and ten thousand, and yet remembering thy mercy didst save the rest: Have pity upon us miserable sinners, who now are visited with great sickness and mortality; that like as thou didst then accept of an atonement, and didst command the destroying Angel to cease from punishing, so it may now please thee to withdraw from us this plague and grievous sickness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

If plagues were the judgement of God against the sins of a people, they naturally gave rise to calls for lamentations, confession of sins, and the rest. Defoe's reporter describes how "The government encouraged their devotion, and appointed public prayers and days of fasting and humiliation, to make public confession of sin and implore the mercy of God to avert the dreadful judgement which hung over their heads."

TODAY, we are distinctly uncomfortable with such language of plagues as divine judgement, leading to the need for confessing our sins.

Christian commentators have rushed to avoid any suggestion that God has sent this plague deliberately on us — and with good reason.

In most strands of Christian theology, the doctrine of Providence is the idea not that everything that happens is part of the original divine will for the world, but that, through everything that happens, God's sovereign will wins out in the end.

It means that God is capable of weaving into his ultimate plan for the world not only the normal good course of events in created time, but even damaging events that work against his will. As a result, even sickness, disaster, and death can become, in the providence of God, a means of achieving his purposes. This does not mean that God *causes* sickness, disaster, and death (how could the Creator God will the destruction of his creation?), but it does mean that none of these are beyond his power to transform and even to use for his glory and his purposes for the goodness and final salvation of the world.

What, then, of the biblical language of judgement and the confession of sins? Can this mean anything for us today? The Greek word commonly translated by our word “judgement” is *krisis*. It could be translated “crisis”, “verdict”, or even “decision”. A crisis is a significant moment, a providential heightening of tension, the drawing together of many strands of life and existence to create a sense of emergency — bringing things to a head, as it were. A crisis, a judgement, is an opportunity for decision, for decisive action.

Divine judgement is, then, a moment of crisis, where events come together in such a way that something significant is revealed about the society, person, or period of time which is under scrutiny. The deliberate visiting of sickness on a people is more characteristic of Norse gods such as Thor, with his thunderbolts, or the capricious gods of pagan Greece or Rome. Judgement, in Christian understanding, is, perhaps, better understood as when the deformed shape of the world as we have fashioned it is revealed in all its brutal reality, when the final truth about us is displayed. Pestilence, therefore, may have more to tell us about ourselves than it does about God.