

Religion in a time of pestilence

21 short prescriptions during the Covid-19 pandemic



Part 3

'I met with wagones, Cartes, & Horses full loden with yong barnes, for fear of the blacke Pestilence, with their boxes of Medicens and sweete perfume. O God, how fast did thei run by hundredes, and were afraied of eche other for feare of smityng.'

In the worst recorded pandemic to date, the “Black Death” of the 14th century, about one third of Europe’s population are estimated to have died. The population in England in 1400 was perhaps half what it had been 100 years earlier.

The jurist Christopher Hales wrote that he had never seen London so deserted as it was during the plague of 1532.² From earliest times, flight was considered the best way of avoiding epidemics, relied upon from England to Asia Minor, from Iberia to the Baltic, by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike.

The Christian response to plagues should be in line with Jesus’s words: *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”*; *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”* The Christian ethic in a time of plague considers that our own life must always be regarded as less important than that of our neighbour.

During plague periods in the Roman Empire, Christians made a name for themselves. During the terrible Antonine plague of the 2nd century, which probably killed off a quarter of the Roman Empire, Christians famously cared for the sick.

The so-called *Plague of Cyprian* is said to have triggered an explosive growth of Christianity. Cyprian’s sermons told Christians to redouble efforts to care for the living. His fellow bishop Dionysius described how Christians, *“Heedless of danger ... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.”*

Nor was it just Christians who noted this reaction of Christians to the plague. A century later, pagan Emperor Julian complained bitterly of how *“the Galileans”* would even care for non-Christian sick

people. The church historian Pontianus recounts how Christians ensured that “good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.”

This habit of sacrificial care has reappeared throughout history. In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Martin Luther refused calls to flee the city and protect himself. Rather, he stayed and ministered to the sick. The refusal to flee cost his daughter Elizabeth her life. But it produced a tract, “Whether Christians Should Flee the Plague,” where Luther provides a clear articulation of the Christian epidemic response: We die at our posts.

National days of prayer during times of crisis

A preface in the forms of prayer used during plague epidemics in the 16th and 17th centuries declared:

“We be taught by many and sundry examples of holy Scriptures, that upon occasion of particular punishments, afflictions, and perils, which God of his most just judgement has some times sent among his people to show his wrath against sin, and to call his people to repentance and to the redress of their lives: the godly have been provoked and stirred up to more fervency and diligence in prayer, fasting, and alms deeds, to a more deep consideration of their consciences, to ponder their unthankfulness and forgetfulness of God’s merciful benefits towards them, with craving of pardon for the time past, and to ask his assistance for the time to come to live more godly, and so to be defended and delivered from all further perils & dangers. . . (1563)”

As the penitence, petitions, and promises of repentance had to be fulsome and deeply felt, the forms of prayer were elaborate and lengthy, running to scores of pages, with new services for matins, litany, and evening prayer containing the full texts of biblical lessons and psalms, long homilies or exhortations, and special prayers expressed in hundreds of words.

At the end of the crisis orders were issued for prayers, or days, of thanksgiving. A thanksgiving prayer at the end of an outbreak of cholera in 1849 read:

“Accept, we beseech Thee, O merciful God, the praises and thanksgivings of Thy people, whom Thou has graciously relieved from the sore judgment of grievous sickness and mortality which has lately afflicted our land. Incline us to devote to Thy service the lives which Thou hast spared; and so enlighten our understandings and purify our affections by Thy Holy Spirit, that we may learn from Thy judgments to fear Thy wrath above all things, and may be led by Thy goodness to love Thee with our whole heart, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In the same way Christians created the first hospitals in Europe as places to provide care during times of plague, the church today carries on in an adapted form for the time being and provides a beacon of hope, calm and fellowship in the eye of the storm.

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