

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Confession Prayer: July 8th: Some Notes

The pin-pointed references are: **Job 40:3-5, Job 42: 1-6, Daniel 9**. The first two are short and individual: Job fighting a very personal battle of doubt/faith (though maybe one we fight ourselves). We can find comparable passages in the Psalms and the Prophets: special people sharing a [universal?] experience, and a reminder that we are all special. Daniel is one of many Old Testament individuals who express passionately **collective** guilt: the failure of the Jewish people to live up to the uniquely high standards demanded of them by God. From Moses onwards, there is collective confession after collective confession.

Job 40: 3-5: I'm speechless, in awe – words fail me: I should never have opened my mouth! I've talked too much, way too much, I'm ready to shut up and listen. Remember the context: Job has lost everything – riches to rags, apart from a group of would-be comforting friends, whose underlying message is that if God has made Job suffer so badly, Job must have done something dreadful. This is very much the logic of the collective confession prayers: we fail/God punishes. Let's make a fresh start. Job, however, knows he has not done anything to "deserve" the loss of family, income, health.. Indeed, the whole Book of Job is about wrestling with the mystery of "unjustified suffering". (is suffering ever "justified", other than in the rather simplistic case of e.g. the hang-over after binge drinking? In Job's case, the debate is about "What have I done to deserve this?"; but at least he is alive. His family members are dead! What have he/they done to deserve death? Were he the worst sinner in the world, what logic is there in his family and live-stock being killed to punish him?

These questions lead us back to the collective guilt issue. If foreign invasion, slaughter, and exile are the punishment for "collective guilt", what about the innocent adults (was everybody equally guilty)? In the unlikely event of all the adults being equally guilty, what about the children caught up in the collective punishment?

Maybe Job was entitled to ask God questions! (And Daniel?)

In a desperate attempt to simplify the inherently complicated, how do you feel about this?:

- 1) Sin is doing something we know to be wrong because someone is going to get hurt by what we do (or, in the case of responsible adults, we would have known had we thought about it).
- 2) We sin individually, but we also carry responsibility if we are party to a collective sin – because we failed to speak out against a sinful collective decision.
- 3) For people of faith, all sin is against God as well as against another person or persons.
- 4) Breaking the law is often sinful as well as criminal, but it is possible to imagine situations in which the law and our conscience clash – I've driven through a red light

to get a passenger having an epileptic fit to a safe place. Changes in health or education law can challenge the personal convictions of health or education professions.

- 5) God does forgive, though repentance is usually the road to forgiveness (more than “oops, sorry!”); and in some cases making amends, and in some cases facing legal action and punishment, may also be involved.
- 6) Our own ability to forgive, though not necessarily forget, is important.
- 7) Sin can have painful consequences for the sinner, but the “I sin/I suffer” concept of how God deals with us is a bit simplistic; and some at least of the “God as punisher” concept of God may be our transferring our own desire for revenge onto God
- 8) We are all in favour of both justice and mercy, and rightly so. We are maybe tempted to wishing mercy for me, and just punishment for him/her. (Remember the Jesus story of the slave who got his master to forgive him a very large debt, and then tried to exact from a fellow slave repayment of a very small debt.... though when it comes to the tail end of that story, and the master punishing the ungrateful servant *and his wife and children...?*) *P.S. Not unrelated: imprisonment of mothers with children? But, if not mothers with children, what about fathers. Just imprison single men with no elderly parents, or dependant siblings?*