

LENT BOOK 2023

Sunday Talk 5th Sunday of Lent

DOES PRAYER REALLY WORK?

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'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.'¹

1. This sentence seems to imply that God positively causes or allows us to suffer to give us a lesson.
2. Other sentences here and there in Scripture seem to vouch for this interpretation, like the words from the book of Proverbs quoted in the letter to the Hebrews:

'The Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as a son.'²

3. However, more persuasive even than the apparent confirmation from Scripture, this interpretation is welcomed by the most insidious parasite of our spiritual and emotional life, namely guilt.
 - 3.1. If this misfortune, this trouble, this accident is happening to me, it is because I have disobeyed God, I have displeased him in one way or the other, I deserve it.
4. This travesty of Christian faith keeps such a strong hold on us because it is the core of the pagan sense of sacred that has plagued mankind ever since the first religious feeling dawned in the conscience of our earliest ancestors.
 - 4.1. Instinctive human piety is based on fear.
 - 4.2. Confronted with an environment that they could only partially understand, our forebears ascribed everything they could not explain to invisible agents (gods, demons, spirits) whose identity and motives were unfathomable.
 - 4.3. Nothing is more tempting than attributing calamities or misfortunes to supernatural agents that we might have inadvertently displeased and that have to be appeased in one way or another.
 - 4.4. This was the juncture ascribed by anthropologists to the appearance of blood sacrifice (human or animal): the blood was perceived as a way of expiating the possible displeasure of whichever of these supernatural agents we might have offended, or of ingratiating them as a precaution, or, why not, of enlisting their help against our enemies.
5. We might think that we have overcome these primitive instincts today, especially as we are more or less persuaded that everything can be explained scientifically and that if something still seems

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¹ Psalm 119.71.

² Hebrews 12.6, quoting Proverbs 3.11–12.

incomprehensible we will get there one day. And yet, these instincts remain very much alive and have changed their focus only marginally.

- 5.1. Whether or not we believe that there is an explanation for a tsunami, an earthquake, a terror attack or, more mundanely, an illness, a flood of anxiety, a heartbreak and so on, whenever any of these adversities hits us we cannot evade a nagging question from bothering us: 'Why me?' or 'What have I done to deserve it?'
 - 5.2. We might not acknowledge it, but this sentence betrays our core belief in the existence of some agent or principle at work in nature and history which inflicts retaliatory or corrective misery on us.
 - 5.3. Belief in the God of Jesus Christ does not automatically shield us from these instincts and this can condition our interpretation of the sentence quoted above: 'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees'³ – 'It is right that this misfortune should have happened to me because I need to be punished to learn a lesson.'
6. How can such a sentence then become prayer? How can it help us to relate to God in the right way? How can it have become part of the Psalms; that is, the body of prayers authorized and recommended by Scripture?
 7. The answer is that it benefits us precisely insofar as it gives voice to our guilt, unmasks it and entrusts it to the Lord.
 - 7.1. In many ways, this is similar to what happens when a child who has done some mischief cries in the anticipation of reproach or punishment, knowing that the mother or the father will react in exactly the opposite way with consoling words and hugs.
 - 7.2. The only remedy for guilt is tenderness.
 - 7.3. The moment we entrust guilt to the Father's love it loses its power and vanishes like fog when the sun rises.
 8. This is Jesus' way of dealing with us too: not by threatening to punish us but through gentleness, patience and mercy, as we see especially in his remarkable dialogue with the woman caught in adultery.
 9. In this distressing and violent episode, Jesus defies the entrenched misogyny and the patriarchal structure of social, political and religious orders, just as he did in his encounter with the Samaritan woman.
 - 9.1. The woman here is totally passive, treated as a lifeless object: she was caught, brought and made to stand before the group.⁴
 - 9.2. Until Jesus talks to her she has no voice.
 - 9.3. Even before being stoned, she is already crushed under the implacable weight of the social conventions that have moulded her identity since her childhood and make her feel that she deserves to be an object of scorn, exposed to public ignominy and condemned to death.
 - 9.4. She is in the hands of a group of men authorized by religion, law and social conventions to treat her in this way. Nobody can stop them, they have the law on their side, possess the

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³ Psalm 119.71.

⁴ Cf. John 8.3.

unassailable power of self-righteousness, act as the rightful and indispensable enforcers of the social order.

10. How must this woman have felt!
 - 10.1. There is no consideration for her shock and utter devastation, no attempt to investigate the possible motives behind her action.
 - 10.2. Had she betrayed her husband out of sheer lust? Or was this the tragic outcome of the deep unhappiness and frustration of an arranged marriage?
 - 10.3. Had she fallen in love with someone who had shown sympathy for her suffering, been kind to her? Was what had happened just a momentary weakness?
 - 10.4. For these accusers, motives were irrelevant. An adultery involves two characters but the teachers of the law and the Pharisees bring only the woman. Men's casual sexual encounters were a serious breach of the law, but relatively harmless after all. Women, on the other hand, could not be allowed to wriggle out of the absolute dependency in which marriage locked them: the fabric of society depended on that.

11. Thus, the woman herself must have had feelings not dissimilar to those voiced in the sentence of the Psalm quoted above: 'It is good for me to be afflicted'⁵ – 'It is right for me to be punished.'
 - 11.1. Probably still half naked, at the mercy of unforgiving eyes, she already knows that nobody will ever stand up for her, that she is lost, utterly isolated.
 - 11.2. Even if she is still physically alive, she has lost her place in society, her connection to her family, her dignity – she is dishonoured, nobody will treat her with respect ever again, and whoever shows her sympathy is contaminated by her sin and threatened too.
 - 11.3. Physical death was only going to sanction the social death she had incurred already. All social groups are aware of the fatal sway of this form of punishment. More even than death, imprisonment or torture, nothing crushes a person like the segregation resulting from 'excommunication'; that is, from 'being expelled from communication with the group'.

12. Paradoxically, however, segregation is a form of violence we are just as able to inflict on ourselves by giving way to guilt – by judging and condemning ourselves.
 - 12.1. Our ultimate and harshest judge is our own ego.
 - 12.2. Whether with reference to conventions, values, standards or ideal achievements, we think that we can remedy what we perceive to be our waywardness, mediocrity or laziness, or compensate for them through a relentless inner nagging: 'It is good for me to be afflicted.'⁶

13. Just like the whole drama staged by the Pharisees against Jesus, this inner nagging is a trap: 'They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.'⁷
 - 13.1. Through accusation, exclusion and condemnation, the group funnels and expels its inner violence on an external target and in this way preserves and increases its cohesion.

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⁵ Cf. Psalm 119.71.

⁶ Cf. Psalm 119.71.

⁷ John 8.6.

- 13.2. Self-accusation plays an analogous role. Our heart frames the events of our life in ways that highlight failure, inadequacy, unworthiness.
- 13.3. Our best motives become the basis for self-reproach: 'It is good for me to be afflicted.'⁸
14. And this applies in a special way to religion.
- 14.1. Even when we claim to be indifferent to its institutionalized forms, do not attend church and ignore the 'teachers of the law', we can never altogether shake the bits of teaching we have internalized at a vulnerable stage in our life and that rear their heads in times of vulnerability.
- 14.2. We might not use these same words, but we have the corresponding feelings: 'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.'⁹
15. One of the most disturbing sentences I have ever heard in this connection was related to me by a dear friend of mine who was brought up in a conservative Christian household.
- 15.1. He came out to his family when he was a teenager and has now been in a loving relationship with his partner for several years. I see this gay couple as a model for many reasons: their faith, their mutual commitment, the imagination they put into their relationship, their generous hospitality – they want their house to be always open to anyone.
- 15.2. Eventually, the family was touched by the seriousness of my friends' commitment and became more accepting. On the surface, therefore, there was recognition. But unease was not dispelled altogether and, despite their willingness to be affirming, at one point, almost inadvertently, some members of my friend's family came out with this chilling sentence: 'Deep down you know this is sinful.'
16. 'Deep down, if you really listen to your heart, you will find a voice accusing you and condemning your lifestyle.'
- 16.1. The assumption is that inner accusation and condemnation are God's way of leading us.
- 16.2. What can anyone retort to a such a manipulative admonition? I can be distressed, outraged and reject it, but I cannot avoid its poisonous effects.
- 16.3. Instinctive piety thrives on these feelings.
- 16.4. Inner affliction is the only way to learn moral lessons: 'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.'¹⁰
17. Guilt underpins our spiritual edifice just as the public shaming and stoning of a woman caught in adultery upholds religious order in society.
- 17.1. Condemnation is a rallying cry which nobody dares to challenge.
- 17.2. The violence and abuse are not only, nor primarily, physical but are emotional and psychological. Had the woman escaped the stoning she would have felt condemned

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⁸ Cf. Psalm 119.71.

⁹ Psalm 119.71.

¹⁰ Psalm 119.71.

anyway and her worst enemy was going to be herself: her own heart would have condemned her for life.¹¹

18. Jesus' reaction to this show of outrage is visually stunning.
 - 18.1. He keeps silent and bends down towards the ground.
 - 18.2. He diverts the agitation laboriously built up by the mob and dissipates its energy.
 - 18.3. A murderous gang cannot tolerate any distraction from its blind determination to dispose of the catalyst of its hatred. Silence, surprise or wonder could instantaneously deflate the bubble.
 - 18.4. The leaders of the mob are immediately aware of this danger and try to keep the fire of indignation burning, by pushing Jesus for a reaction.

19. It is a great moment: Jesus 'bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger'.¹² This gesture can be given a variety of explanations.
 - 19.1. The law which the Pharisees pretend to apply by stoning the woman was supposed to have been written by the finger of God.
 - 19.2. By writing with his finger, therefore, Jesus claims God's own authority over the way he interprets this law. More, however, is happening here.

20. The dynamics of accusation – both under the collective form described by the Gospel or under the guise of the inner nagging of guilt – tighten their grip on us by monopolizing our shared perception of reality or our individual inner landscape.
 - 20.1. There is no way out. Our complicity with the mob is unavoidable if we want to survive.
 - 20.2. And in the case of guilt, no credible alternative narrative rescues us from the clutch of the voice that taunts us: 'Deep down you know that this is sinful.'
 - 20.3. By catching our attention, diverting us from our obsession, puzzling us, Jesus breaks the conspiracy, undermines the mob, empowers the actors of the drama to take responsibility for themselves.

21. Most people are dragged into a mob out of curiosity, or reluctantly, or simply because resistance would be interpreted as opposition to the group and eventually prove risky. Jesus breaks this vicious spiral with one literally disarming sentence:

'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'¹³

22. He unmasks the illusion that evil can be expelled by casting it on a transgressor.
 - 22.1. The adultery had been committed by the woman – and obviously an unnamed man – but everyone else had been complicit in creating the social, religious and cultural conditions that contributed to it: the patriarchal structure that denied women a right to choice when it came to marriage, the total disregard for the history of this particular woman, her lifestyle, her aspirations, and the possible mitigating circumstances of her act.

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¹¹ Cf. 1 John 3.20.

¹² John 8.6.

¹³ John 8.7.

22.2. Jesus' sentence is not an invitation to give in to evil, but one to fight it not through judgement and accusation but through humble self-knowledge.

22.3. The only way to truly change the world is by changing our own heart first.

23. Jesus' sentence – 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' – is not an encouragement to replace accusation and condemnation of others with self-blame and guilt. Jesus has come to put an end to both:

'There is no fear in love' – which for John can be paraphrased as 'Fear disappears the moment we welcome God's love',

23.1. since he makes clear that

'We love because he first loved us. The one who fears is not made perfect in love';¹⁴ that is: as long as we let guilt and fear of punishment drive our thoughts and influence our decisions, we are still resisting the freedom God wants to give us.

24. This appears luminously in the epilogue of the story of our woman – whom, incidentally, we should once for all stop calling the 'adulterous woman' and start referring to as the 'humiliated woman' instead. We are offered one of the most moving dialogues in the whole of Scripture:

Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 'Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."¹⁵

25. Jesus does not condemn her because authentic change, conversion, renewal and the overcoming of evil never happen through coercion, least of all through the bullying of fear.

25.1. Judgement and condemnation lead us nowhere and do not help anyone.

'I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world', says Jesus.¹⁶

25.2. He has come precisely to give us this good news:

'Neither do I condemn you.'

26. He can enjoin on us – as he does on the woman – to go and fight against evil in our life and in the world because he has freed us from sin, evil, judgement, condemnation and guilt; he has taught us to rely only on his mercy and to become the agents of his consolation.

27. Our only chance to overcome evil, both around us and in us, depends on us listening not to the inner bullying of our heart but to Jesus repeating to us: 'Neither do I condemn you.' In just the same way, John beautifully declares in his first letter:

'This is how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.'¹⁷

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¹⁴ 1 John 4.18–19.

¹⁵ John 8.10–11.

¹⁶ John 12.47.

28. God is not naïve: he knows everything; he knows our sinfulness, ambiguity, flaws, irresoluteness, indolence, sloth better than we do ourselves.

28.1. Guilt obsesses with one or other of the negative aspects of our personality not because it knows us as God does, but, on the contrary, because it is incapable of seeing the whole picture.

28.2. Guilt is a lack of perspective in our vision, a form of narcissism that bemoans the negative aspects of our personality only because they do not correspond to the image we want to have of ourselves.

28.3. When we give over to guilt, we despise ourselves and our hearts shrink.

28.4. We overcome guilt only when, instead of looking into a mirror, we measure our real value by the way the Father looks at us, loves, forgives, affirms, reassures us:

‘Neither do I condemn you’ – because

‘I am greater than your heart’.

John 8:2-11

[2](#)At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. [3](#)The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group [4](#)and said to Jesus,

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. [5](#)In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

[6](#)They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.

[7](#)When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them,

“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

[8](#)Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

[9](#)At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. [10](#)Jesus straightened up and asked her,

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

[11](#)“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”