

Blessings and Curses in the Bible: A Short Reflection

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1. This is by no means a paper or keynote address. It is simply a short reflection that came to my mind this night, Monday 5th, before the CABAN conference opens tomorrow morning.
2. Last Sunday, the first reading was from the Book of Deuteronomy 6, in a famous passage which included the “Shema Yisrael”, the simplest and most radical formulation of the Israelite faith, which Jesus himself confirmed and made his own in today’s Gospel reading from Mark 12:29. The main thrust of the reading is that blessings follow compliance with the law of God, and curses fall down as a natural consequence of those who go against the law of God.
3. Blessings are a reward for good behaviour, while curses are a punishment for bad actions. This is a fundamental teaching of the Israelite faith. Even the ups and downs of the history of Israel were interpreted in relation to fidelity or otherwise to the law of God. It would seem in fact that blessings and curses are two sides of the same coin of accountability.
4. But it is a clear human experience, even in Israel, that not every good behaviour gets immediately rewarded, and many bad actions seem to go unpunished. The story of the Book of Job grapples with the “mystery” of the suffering of the just. We see the same in the tragedy of the “Suffering Servant of Yahweh” in Isa 52:13-53:12, with its apex and fulfilment in the Son of God hanging helpless on the Tree of the Cross on Calvary.
5. Those who are peddling a cheap gospel without the cross easily lead astray the crowds with itching ears. Love of God and love of neighbour are conveniently put aside for a fraudulent emotional profession of faith. If you want things to go well with you, they say, sow your seeds and pay your tithes. Honesty, righteousness, and care of the needy become rare commodity. Is it surprising that much of our brand of religious fervour works well with our endemic corruption and inhuman violence?

6. Despite these anomalous cases, the original truth that “honesty is the best policy” is still true. In a society of rampant corruption, where it seems that dishonesty gets rewarded and integrity has no value, it is easy to begin to adjust to an amoral way of life. The youth no longer see any reason for doing things right. For most of them, the important thing is to succeed, by any means. But it is all an unwise short-sightedness. No society can sustain bad behaviour indefinitely. Sooner than later, the chickens come home to roost. What is the extreme malaise we see around us if not the consequence of our rejection of right way of life?
7. The ultimate accountability is only in the hand of God – and at his own timing. The final equation or full account cannot be balanced in this world, in our time. It can only be at the end of time, when the Son of Man will come to judge the living and the dead.