

GREAT OLD TESTAMENT PRAYERS: DANIEL

(Daniel 9.1-19)

I don't think I am alone in this, but I find it quite hard to admit when I have done something badly or done something I shouldn't have done at all. Among the words that I find hardest to say are, "I was wrong." Am I alone in this?

I've heard many Leaders of the Opposition ask in Parliament "Will the Prime Minister apologise...?" and I don't think I'm ever going to hear the reply, "Yes, sorry about that, I admit I messed up."

The truth is that it's tempting to make excuses or point the finger at someone else when something goes awry. You see it, don't you, when two cars collide? What do the owners always do? They get out of their cars and say in perfect unison, "I am so sorry, that accident was entirely my fault."

Or rather, they start to blame one another and make excuses to explain why the accident was due to the other person's driving. We are never more creative than when we need to make excuses.

Some years ago, I came across some statements people have made on their accident claim forms that they'd sent off to their insurance company, and here are some of them.

One man wrote this: "I was backing my car out of the driveway in the usual manner, when it was struck by the other car in the same place it had been struck several times before." Or this: "I was driving along the motorway when the police pulled me over onto the hard shoulder. Unfortunately I was in the middle lane and there was another car in the way."

A third wrote this: "As I approached the traffic lights, I started to slow down but the traffic in front of me was more stationary than I thought." Another said this: "I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way." Another; "The pedestrian had no idea which way to go, so I ran him over." Finally this: "Going to work at 7am this morning I drove out of my drive straight into a bus because it was 5 minutes early."

Many of us are much better at justifying our sins than we are at confessing them. I am certainly more skilled at identifying other peoples' errors than I am at spotting and admitting my own.

Daniel's prayer in chapter 9 is one of the most remarkable prayers in the Old Testament. And it is extraordinary because instead of blaming others for his own sins, Daniel does the *complete opposite*. He actually says sorry for other people's sins.

In a sense this should make us feel very at home in Great Britain. In continental Europe we are famous for apologising for things we have not done. The Italians actually have a proverb for this eccentric behaviour: "Knock an Englishman off his feet" they say, "and he'll apologise to you before he hits the pavement!"

We'll unpack that in a minute, but I need to begin with a bit of background.

The book of Daniel is situated in what we know as the years of exile when God's people were forcibly deported to another land. For many centuries before that time, prophets warned God's people again and again that they were in breach of the terms of their covenant with God the penalty for which was eviction from their land. Mostly, they took no notice.

In fact, there were two kinds of prophet who used to speak publicly throughout Israel's history; some reassured the people with comforting thoughts and promises of peace, and others alerted the people to the danger of foreign invasion. Basically, the ones who said nice things had large audiences cheering them on and the ones who were a bit more doom and gloom were usually ignored or treated badly.

But they were right. There *were* several invasions and in one of them a few thousand high ranking officials were led off in chains to Babylon, never to see home again. Among them was a young man in his late teens called Daniel. Even when that happened, the popular message was, "Oh, don't worry, it'll only be for a few years." But it lasted much longer than that as we'll see.

On 6 October 539BC, King Belshazzar of Babylon was partying with his friends. Everybody knew that Babylon was impregnable. Its walls were a picture of strength and power. But as they partied away, they didn't know that the Persians had spent the past few weeks building makeshift dams to divert the River Euphrates away from Babylon. As darkness fell and the sounds of revelling and drinking filled the night air, the Persians activated the dams. The riverbed slowly emptied exposing two undefended channels under those immense and mighty city walls. The Persian army tunnelled into the city and before the Babylonians even realized they were there, the city had fallen.

Daniel chapter 9 is situated just after that event, about 67 years after his people first started to serve Babylon. And it finds this godly man Daniel asking himself, "How is this change of government going to affect my people, God's people?" He looks around and he wonders whether this new reality will mean his people can go back home to their land.

By this time, Daniel is in his eighties and in order to find an answer to his question, he goes not to the words of men but to the words of God. And what he finds is this: Jeremiah, unlike the popular, false prophets, never said "It'll be only for a few years." He said (in chapters 25 and 29), "No, it would be 70 years."

Daniel does his sums and works out that 67 years have already passed. Isn't that exciting? If Jeremiah is right, and Jeremiah was always right, Daniel's people would be able to go back home in three years' time!

But it wasn't as straightforward as that. Because God's promise, like all God's promises, carried a very important condition. In the very passage where God says it will be 70 years he adds: "If you seek me with all your heart." And Daniel looks round and realises that no one is praying. They can go back if they call on God and seek him with all their hearts but no one is – so Daniel gets on his knees and prays for the fulfilment of that promise.

Here's what Daniel says in his prayer:

1) God is good. Daniel's prayer is one of worship all the way through. He speaks out truth about God's goodness, his mercy, his unfailing love, his faithfulness, his might and power.

2) This is serious. Daniel's prayer speaks of how grave the situation is. We tend to use flattering synonyms for sin – we talk of our faults, our failings, our weaknesses but Daniel uses vocabulary like "twisted" and "treacherous." We are guilty of treason he says. From the top down, from highest government all the way through national institutions and civic society Daniel confesses the guilt of the whole nation. He never uses the word "them" even though he was just a boy when this happened. But he says "sorry" before he says "please."

3) We are getting all that we deserve. Daniel's prayer says, it's no one's fault but ours. God sent prophet after prophet and no one took any notice. There are no feeble excuses like on those car insurance claim forms. Daniel says that God's judgement is absolutely fair.

4) And finally, Daniel does not plead his own righteousness even though he is one of only two figures in the Old Testament about whom nothing bad is recorded, (the other being Joseph). We can't plead with God the basis of being good Christians – we can only pray, like Daniel did, on the grounds of God's goodness and his good name.

Our own country, like the Judah of Jeremiah and Daniel's day, is one which has a façade of piety but underneath is very different. We can, and do, put on lavish royal weddings at Westminster Abbey with an extravagant Christian veneer, and just 200 metres away pass laws in utter defiance of God's commands.

But what Daniel 9 tells me is that Britain doesn't need a Christian protest movement, as much as it needs a Christian prayer movement.

And that is what Britain is going to get. Because, as you may have heard, our Archbishops Justin and Sentamu have written to all serving clergy in the Church of England in the last few weeks expressing their longing "to see a great wave of prayer across our land." They have set aside the week of 8-15 May as a time when churches will pray for the renewal of the Holy Spirit and for the confidence to rise up with a fresh zeal for the proclamation of the gospel.

As Daniel prayed...

Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws...

Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us...

We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay...