

Self-appraisal and self-deception

Thought for the Day

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The principal story-line this week in the Downing Street soap-opera has been the odd couple's struggle to account for their past and set out their intentions for the future.

More privately, the same has been true of Jews throughout the world. This is the first week of the Jewish year, which culminates in the day-long fast of Yom Kippur. Usually called the "Days of Penitence", the Hebrew term might be better translated as "Review", when we take a spiritual yardstick to our deeds – and misdeeds – of the last year, and turn our thoughts to learning from our mistakes.

This time is dominated by a simple but telling metaphor: that the world and all that is in it are judged and those judgements are recorded at the new year, but that the record is not sealed till Yom Kippur. That give us this week to turn over a new leaf and avert a bad verdict, and tradition teaches that the way to get our act together is through repentance, prayer and charity. In this way, God is seen as embodying justice at the start of the week and mercy at the end.

I've also been reflecting on earthly justice rather a lot recently, attending three different courses for members of various tribunals I sit on. There the emphasis has been on unbiased weighing of the evidence, giving both sides a fair hearing – but always looking back at the past event that is in dispute.

That's all our courts can do – to try to deliver a just verdict based on the evidence before them. Sadly – like politicians – they don't always get it right, and the consequences can be severe, not least because witnesses do not always tell the truth, far less the whole truth and nothing but the truth!

But you can't lie to yourself, and that's what this week is about. So may we all take what opportunities we have to redress the balance, and may we all, in the traditional prayer, be inscribed – and sealed – in the book of life, the book of happiness, and the book of peace.