

# *turn, then, and live*

a sermon preached on the  
*seventeenth sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Ezek 18:1-4, 25-32; Ps 25:1-9; Phil 2:1-13; Mt 21:23-32

Jesus asks the chief priests and the elders which of two sons takes the right path, the one who commits to working in the vineyard but fails to do so, or the one who initially refuses but then changes his mind and does what he is asked.

When I was at high school in country South Australia, my family lived on a vineyard that my father managed. We lived about 15 km from the nearest town so, being too young to drive and without public transport I spent most of the time at home on the farm. There being not much else to do I worked for my father during all the school holidays. As the boss's son I got all the rubbish jobs. I hated pretty much every minute of it. I remember for the first holiday I worked I was paid 33cents an hour, \$11 after tax for a week's manual labour. I have some sympathy for the son who told his father he would work in the vineyard but skived off to go fishing, or something.

The chief priests and the elders answer Jesus' question, that the son who refuses then changes his mind and works is the one who has done the right thing, but they don't get a clear acknowledgement from Jesus. They have given the right answer but unwittingly incriminated themselves in the process, because they too fail to abide by their commitments – commitment to the Torah that is their life's foundation. So Jesus compares them with the unclean, the prostitutes and tax collectors whom, he says, have entered the kingdom of God ahead of them.

Today is the first day of sober October – I hadn't heard of sober October until last week. It is one of these perhaps new age, devices to get you off the booze, or whatever vice or addiction that besets you. There are a number of similar things – Feb fast, dry July and New Year resolutions. These are secular versions of Lent or Ramadan without the formal spirituality, and with a focus on personal health and well-being. Who of us, I wonder, has ever really been successful in sticking to these well-meaning plans? Who has lasted beyond the last day of the month, who has really turned their life around through these exercises. I certainly haven't.

They illustrate to me the point Jesus was making, that our commitments to ourselves and to God a very fragile, well meant at the time, but devilishly hard to maintain. I know I will have perjured myself before the greeting of peace. When in the creed we say 'We believe in one God ...' the opening sentence – do I have only one God? Of course not!

There is nothing new in this problem. Paul across three chapters of his letter to the Romans gives us a heart-rending account of his own struggle to do right:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

St Augustine, in his *Confessions*, admitted to the same torment – rather more colourfully:

But I wretched, most wretched, in the very commencement of my early youth, had begged chastity of You, and said, “Give me chastity and continence, only not yet”. For I feared lest You should hear me too soon, and too soon cure me of the disease of lust, which I wished to have satisfied, rather than extinguished.

Oh dear, he is in bother! Unfortunately, Augustine’s rather overwrought pessimism has delivered us the doctrine of original sin, authorising the church to load onto its susceptible people a terrible burden of the guilt of sin. At least, that is the case in much of the Western church – the church that developed from the centre of Rome and from which this church is descended.

The Western church’s preoccupation with original sin arose from the Trinitarian formulation of the Nicene creed which we will shortly say. Where we will affirm that Jesus Christ is the only son of God and of one being with the father ... that Jesus and God are of one being, of one substance.

If Jesus was one with God, himself entirely God and, if we are to live like he did, then a very high standard of perfection is set on us. This Nicene formulation of the perfect unity between Jesus and God was vigorously argued over in Augustine’s lifetime.

But the Eastern Church – the Orthodox church – did not accept that Jesus was indivisibly divine, instead seeing him as fully divine while at the same time fully human. That means he was subject to the contingency of human failing in an imperfect world, as we are. We see Jesus’ humanity in scripture where as a child he disobeys his parents and gets lost in Jerusalem and also in the parable of the Canaanite woman who seems to change his mind on confining his ministry to Israel (Matt 15.26ff).

The Eastern church’s recognition of Jesus’ humanity gives them a somewhat less austere outlook on human failure and its consequences. Their approach reflects the words of Ezekiel from today:

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

In my heart the Eastern formula fits more closely with how I understand the compassion of Christ in and for the world. And I wonder if preoccupation with our sin is too self-indulgent and diverts our attention away from our duty to care for others, to see Christ in them – living, broken, crucified, risen and glorious? That would be to see people in the way I expect God sees us – in need of grace, and unable to find it for ourselves. It would also free us from much that we do that is sin.

Isaac, a monk from Qatar who was briefly Bishop of Nineveh, in the Eastern Church, put it this way:

The wealth of His love and power and wisdom will become known all the more – and so will the insistent might of the waves of His goodness. It is not [the way of] the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction ... for things of which He knew even before they were fashioned.

So with Isaac in mind we can return to Paul, who ultimately concludes on his sinfulness: ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!