

Law & Sin

Pentecost 3 – 3rd July 2011

Readings:

Romans 7: 15-25a

God of Love, though we are created in your image, we do not always display that image in our lives. Within us there is a struggle, a battle between our best intentions, and the fact of the way we live.

In our better moments, we want to do right; but we lack the will to do what we intend.

In our more honest moments we admit the many ways we have betrayed your love for us.

Forgive us Lord. Continue to love and uphold us even in our many failures to love you. Give us the strength we need to be honest about ourselves, to recognise our need for you in our lives. AMEN.

Let me start with a wee story. About two young fellows, Murphy and Clancy. They were walking past a Catholic church one day and Murphy who was brought up a good Catholic said to his mate, "You know I've not been to confession for such a long time, I think I'll do the right thing and go in and get absolution." So Murphy goes in and starts confessing to the priest. But he gets no further than his first big sin, an admission that he had his way with a woman. The priest is outraged. "I know your voice, Murphy, and this is not the first time this has happened. I want to know the woman's name." Well Murphy is taken aback and he replies, "It's not proper that you should ask, and I'll not be telling you."

The priest is really outraged this time. "If you want absolution, you'll be telling me. Was it O'Reilly's sister?" Murphy refused to answer. "I'll ask you again, was it the widow Harrington?" Still no answer from Murphy. "One more time I'll ask: was it the Flanagan girl?" "For the third time, I'll not be telling you," said Murphy. "Then you'll be getting no absolution from me. Out you go!"

His friend Clancy was waiting outside, "Well did you get absolution?" he asked. "No," replied Murphy sadly. But then he brightened up and said with a smile, "But I got three good leads." *p356 A World of Stories.*

And what is it that Paul says - "The good that I would do, I cannot."
Poor old Murphy - he couldn't help himself.

I don't know whether you've ever listened to those debates on radio about child protection. Not that long ago I heard one of the experts talking about a new law that had come into force in Scotland that prohibits the smacking or hitting of children under three years of age. Now to someone who has worked in child protection for years and who has seen first hand the tragic result of smacks that have gotten out of hand, I thought that the law made a lot of sense. After all how much does a baby or toddler understand of consequences? But I was in for a shock when the talk-back lines were opened. Something that I had taken as common sense-law to protect young children from being hit, was seen by

most of the callers as a severe infringement of parental rights. How dare a government try to interfere with a parent's right to discipline their child.

And similar arguments are being put by governments and corporations. The law should butt out and let us regulate ourselves - after all we can be trusted to do the right thing. So when the United Nations sets up an international court to deal with War Crimes, the US government refuses to ratify the agreement. It doesn't apply to us. And when the ACCC tries to curtail some of the economic excesses of big corporations - there is a cry that it is an infringement on free trade.

In each of the three cases we have individuals and groups claiming that they can be relied upon to do the right thing. Self regulation is all the rage. Big mining and oil companies can be trusted to do the right thing by us all.

Sadly, reality indicates otherwise. Child abuse continues to be a growing blight on our society. Nations continue to commit atrocities in the midst of war. And companies continue to despoil our environment in their relentless quest to improve the bottom line. And what is it that Paul says - "The good that I would do, I cannot."

The other day I came across the Preamble to the United Nations Charter of June 1945. Listen and see how we measure up some 61 years later.

"We the people of the United Nations, determine to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war..... and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small... to practice tolerance and to live together in peace.... as good neighbours.... (and we) have resolved to combine these efforts to accomplish our aims."

I wonder how hollow those words sound in the light of events of the past sixty odd years.

And what is it that Paul says - "The good that I would do, I cannot."
But you don't need to go to the United Nations to see the truth in Paul's words. The passage from Romans 7 that we heard this morning talks of a battle going on inside Paul, going on inside each of us, where good and evil compete for ascendancy in our lives. They cohabit. We talk of our good side and our bad side. Who amongst us would dare to say that they have not experienced any destructive impulses? I don't know the specifics of Paul's internal battle between good and evil, but I know something of the struggle that goes on inside me and it is that knowledge that drives me like Paul, towards the Christ.

In the 7th chapter of Romans and elsewhere Paul talks of the creation of Law to deal with human's propensity to do evil. But Paul knows that laws of themselves will not stop wrongdoing, will not eradicate sin. And we realize it ourselves. That's what my talk-back callers were claiming when they objected to child protection laws. That's what corporations say when they want to self regulate. Laws do not stop people from doing wrong.

For Paul, Law only points to the problem of evil in the world.
And commitment to Christ is Paul's solution.

At the end of this 7th chapter of Romans, Paul cries in desperation, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And his answer immediately is: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

It's an old message. One that used to be delivered with fire and brimstone. But one that needs to be reiterated in today's age when so many people are trying to work out their own salvation. Trying to work out what is right without Christ is like trying to get around on the ocean without a compass. You quickly become lost.

So what guides you when you have to make ethical decisions? If we say we are Christian then it has to be Christ to whom we need to look for guidance. And when we do the things we wish we hadn't, when we do say things we wish we could take back, we are given the opportunity to bring those things to Christ so we can start again - in his strength not our own.

"Who will rescue me from this body of death?" we cry, and immediately comes the answer: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

So perhaps when we have ethical decisions to make we should look no further than our own Church's commitment to the Australian people made in 1977, a statement that is as fresh today as it was then. Listen to this:

"We the people of the Uniting Church affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.

We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment.

Finally we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is God, under whose judgment the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church, as an institution within the nation, must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive. We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all

*Pilgrim Uniting Church
Rev. Tony Duncan - Sermon*

*persons everywhere - the family of the One God – the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth
the One who gave His life for others.*

In the spirit of His self-giving love we seek to go forward.”

And all of that can only be achieved by living in the Spirit of Christ.

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