

## ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2008

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Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7

### "Is 'Sin' Obsolete? Its Decline and Retrieval"

One of you said to me recently, "We don't talk about sin these days. Why do you think that should be?" Another said, "We don't seem to confess our sins very much in the prayers. Is there a reason?" This is about the decline, and retrieval of 'sin'.

#### I

**First, its decline.** In my teens it seemed like preachers spent a lot of sermon time talking about liquor, lotteries and licentiousness. I wasn't interested in liquor or lotteries, and wasn't sure what licentiousness was. It sounded interesting, but I gathered it was off limits. The whole bundle, and a lot more as well, was lumped together as 'sin'. We heard quite a lot about 'sin'.

One year when I was Chaplain with the University of Melbourne, I was waited on by a rep' of MUDS – Melbourne University Debating Society. Would I do a public debate, teamed with a student, against a philosophy professor, also teamed with a student? It sounded interesting. I knew the professor, and knew him to be anti-religion.

The debate would be staged one lunch hour, and in an Arts faculty lecture theatre. The topic would be "that Christianity is founded on a psychology of guilt." The student who had come to see me was surprised when I asked which side they wanted me to take. I would have been happy with either. But they assumed I would take the negative – arguing that Christianity was not founded on a psychology of guilt. So it was, and we had a resounding win on that one.

But I could have taken the affirmative side. I don't believe Christianity is founded on a psychology of guilt, but I *do* believe as taught and interpreted it has produced a lot of guilt-ridden and anxious people. That's not the same as saying it's founded on a psychology of guilt, though. However, a heavy emphasis on 'sin' has been a good way of keeping the troops in line.

The late Richard McGarvie, former governor of Victoria, distinguished High Court judge, and an elder in our Beaumaris parish, was instrumental in my preaching at the opening of the legal year during his tenure. He asked me back to Government House afterwards and we talked church, society, theology and public affairs. He said, part tongue in cheek but not facetiously either, that he thought the church made a mistake in doing away with hell.

When I lived in New Hampshire during the late 60s, I heard about the legendary Jonathan Edwards, Congregational evangelist from Northampton, Mass., just over the state line. Edwards is credited with sparking in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century what was called 'The Great Awakening'. His most memorable sermon was "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God." It was based on a text in Deuteronomy, "Their foot shall slide in due time." We're told that Edwards stood stock still, left elbow on the pulpit and with no gestures – speaking in a calm voice. Yet an account from the time says

*"The theme of the message was 'the God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over a fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.'*

*Men and women stood up and rolled on the floor, their cries once drowning out the voice of the preacher. Some are said to have laid hold on the pillars and braces of the church, apparently feeling at that very moment their feet were sliding, that they were being precipitated into hell."*

Most of us today derive a certain smug amusement from that kind of story about that kind of religion. In consequence it is rather unfashionable to talk in an 'enlightened' congregation about 'sin'. That may be a pity. I want to suggest why it may be a pity.

## II

**So to its retrieval.** To do this, I take you back to a very ancient legend from the 'dreaming' of the Hebrew people. I think most of us are aware that there are two legends about creation in the early chapters of Genesis. The first runs from Genesis 1:1 to 2:3, and the second runs from Genesis 2:4 to verse 25. They come from different sources, and the second account is actually quite a bit older than the first.

There are clear differences between them. They're like two stories from the dreaming coming from aboriginal nations in different parts of Australia. The first account has plants, marine animals, birds, land animals and humans appearing in that order. The second account has man (not woman), plants, land animals and birds, and *then* woman, appearing in that order. The stories have different names for God, and they are different in literary style.

It's the second (or part thereof) that we heard again this morning. It says the Eternal puts the man in Eden to care for it. "You can eat," he says, "from any tree on the estate, except one." Then we have the Eternal bringing all the animals and birds to the man to see what he will call them. Finally he puts the man to sleep and from one of his ribs fashions a woman. Then enter the snake.

But before that comes the crucial bit that's often missed. God fashions every beast and bird, bringing them to the man to see what he will call them. So the man names all the animals and the birds and every wild beast. It's not like God brings them along to the man and says, "See here, this is a giraffe; it's to keep kids entertained in the zoo. This is a microorganism; it's to keep the micro-biologists out of mischief. This is a merino sheep; it will keep the Australian economy afloat." (Well, maybe!)

God doesn't do that; he invites 'Adam' to name the animals. We need to understand that in the Hebrew mind, to name something is to decide its purpose; this is why choosing names is so, so important for Jewish people. Your name sets out what your parents want you to be. So, God says in effect, "You decide, Adam, what they're for. You manage and care for them as my park ranger. That's your job. I trust you. Do it well."

As I said, 'enter the serpent'. Here the story takes a nasty twist. It says the serpent is very cunning, more so than any creature the Eternal had made. He says to the woman, "And so God says you're not to eat fruit from any tree on the estate?" The woman says, "No, we can eat fruit from any of the trees but one in the centre of the estate. God says we'll die if we touch it." The serpent says, "No, you won't die. God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you'll be like gods, knowing good and evil. Go ahead and eat."

She does, and so does Adam, and they're 'sprung' (as we say) by God, who is taking an evening stroll around the estate. "What's going on?" The woman says, "I ate because the serpent beguiled me." When I was an Assembly delegate some years ago, one of our indigenous ministers said to me, "Pity Adam and Eve weren't kooris, John. They wouldn't have eaten the fruit. They would have killed and

cooked the snake, and saved all that trouble!”

See what’s happened, though? Having been told to name the animals, the first thing the Adams family do is let an animal tell them what to do. They abdicate from the responsibility they’ve been assigned by the Eternal. They betray the trust invested in them. Their failure is allowing to control them what they are meant to control. Harvard theologian Harvey Cox wrote a book called “On Not Leaving it to the Snake”!

**That, brothers and sisters, is what ‘sin’ is.** It is abdicating from responsibility to manage properly God’s estate – letting the snake (or whatever) tell us what to do. This is a very different way of looking at ‘sin’; not those trivial indulgences in liquor, lottery and licentiousness – but letting what the New Testament calls ‘powers and principalities’ rule our lives. ‘Powers and principalities’ today are things like mass media, propaganda, public opinion, sex, advertising and so on.

I want to conclude with something about this in the letter to the Colossians. When a conquering Roman general returned from foreign parts, to be applauded by crowds lining the Appian Way and honoured by Caesar, it would be common for him to be trailed by the spoils of war: not just treasure looted from the peoples put down, but with lines of slaves. These would be the signs of triumph. The writer of Colossians takes this as an image for the way he sees Jesus the Christ overcoming and helping us overcome, powers and principalities.

Of course, it’s a figurative way of talking about Jesus the Christ, comparing him with a returning Roman general. The point is that he is typified here as the genuinely free and responsible human being – the new Adam, the first-born in a new kind of humanity who embraces the responsibility given him by the Eternal. I love a very ancient song for the way it encapsulates this: Psalm 8.

*As I look to the heavens your fingers have made,  
The moon and the stars you have shaped,  
I ask “What is humanity that you bother with us?”  
Yet you have made us little less than divine,  
You crowned us with majesty and honour,  
Giving us charge over all your hands have made,  
With all things underneath our feet –  
Sheep and oxen, all of them, yes and the wild beasts,  
Birds of the air and fish of the sea –  
All that swims on the wet sea paths.  
O Eternal One, what majesty is yours over the universe!*