We are in a political season, which means that nothing is our fault. For it is a time when politicians tell us that there are no consequences in life – we can run with scissors, live on a diet of whiskey and donuts and go swimming with polar bears. And if for some reason anything goes wrong it’s the fault of whoever is on the other side of the political fence, be it the one percent, the progressives, the gun owners, the social justice warriors or the fact that someone green lighted a sequel to Top Gun. We are told that whoever it is that we don’t like are the ones who are responsible for why we aren’t rich, fulfilled or have minty fresh breath. Name the problem and the political class can find you a scapegoat. And if only it was that easy. … Since this is Lent the Lectionary really conspires against such an interpretation of the world wherein all our problems are someone else’s fault.

In Genesis we have the first sin, that is the whole forbidden fruit business and the desire to be like God. The Psalm is about confessing our sins, which of course implies that we have some sins to confess and the Epistle recounts the sin of Adam and reminds us that we all sin. We finally get some good news in the Gospel with Jesus at least not giving into the sin that Satan is dangling in front of him, but that of course reminds us of all the times that we don’t act like Jesus and fold like a cheap suit at the first sign of temptation. And so here is the question that we need to answer, or at least one I think we need to answer is how much of the stuff that we do wrong is our own fault, for which we are responsible and how much falls into the political category of it being someone else’s fault? To clarify these two positions a little bit let’s turn to the font of all wisdom – show tunes. On one side we have the the Jets who sing in West Side Story, “Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke, You gotta understand, It's just our bringin' up-ke That gets us out of hand. Our mothers all are junkies, Our fathers all are drunks. Golly Moses, natcherly we're punks!” In other words, we may do stuff wrong but its all our parents fault. The other side of this is the message we get from our readings today and also comes out in the unofficial slogan of the Lutheran Church that its all your own fault. So what is the proper understanding of our relationship to sin? Are we responsible or is it someone else? Well since we are Anglican and inheritors of what John Henry Newman called the via media I am going to say the answer lies in the middle. And I don’t think this is something I cooked up myself, I think scripture actually bears it out. So let’s get going…

As mentioned a few moments ago we have just started the season of Lent, which as you certainly know is a penitential season. But being penitent does not simply mean running around saying we are really sorry for being miserable sinners. Certainly it is a time to pray and discover what in us is not glorifying to God, but it does not end there. We are not to simply to tell the world the rottenness of our soul, but rather we are to move closer towards God, to further be filled with the glory of God. In one of C.S. Lewis’s books (I can’t remember which one) he talks about a Christian who is something of a miserable person. When someone points this out to Lewis he responds by saying “you should have seen them before.” The hope in Lent is we come out of it with people able to say, “but you should have seen them before.” Lent is about movement. Certainly there are those like the Jets who have started with some terrible setbacks, with unloving parents or what have you. And God understands this; God understands that none of us are going to be saints overnight.

Something that I have brought up a few times in discussing our life in Christ and our salvation is how I find the model of the Eastern Church more helpful than that of the Western Church. Speaking in broad terms the Western Church has modeled salvation in an almost court room like manner. That is if your life is brought to trial and the evidence for you being a decent person outweighs the evidence for you being a rotten person, then you are acquitted and get to go to the big country club in the sky. If you think of Michelangelo’s paintings in the Sistine Chapel you probably recall the scene of The Last Judgment. In it God is basically declaring the eternal state of everyone’s soul with a pointing of his hand – you are in or you are out. The Eastern Church has a different vision, one that is largely based on the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory argued that God is infinite goodness, and since this goodness is infinite there will always be more of God to discover. This means that the afterlife is not just a place to sit back, relax and enjoy unlimited Buffalo wings and Mai Tais, but is rather a continuation of life on this earth. That is it is a continuation of growing into God’s likeness. Practically speaking what this means is that we are never done and so a moment of judgment does not make sense in such a context. Rather the Eastern Church takes their model not as a weighing of the evidence but rather a question about direction. That is are we growing more into God’s likeness or are we going the other way. I think this understanding does a much better job of explaining God being merciful while at the same time holding us accountable for our sin.

If life is simply about weighing the good versus bad then what does this say about people who have been brought up in very bad circumstances. If you have grown up in a loving home it might be much easier to stockpile the good pieces of evidence then if you grew up in a bad neighborhood with abusive parents. This directional understanding of our life in God is also confirmed in scripture. Think for a moment about the Penitent thief. If you recall Jesus tells him while they are next to each other on the cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” And while I know the Romans were not always the most stringent in their criterion for who would be crucified, I am going to assert that this guy’s life if subjected to the scales of justice would probably come up short. And yet Jesus tells him that he will be with him in Paradise. The only way this can be justified is if we look at a direction model. The man is now journeying towards God. Some people may be further along in this journey while others may be behind us but that is really what the Christian life is all about: the journey

Certainly in this life we do things that we shouldn’t and we have no one to blame but ourselves, but we also may find ourselves in circumstances where things are truly not our fault. The proper response to either of these is movement, movement towards God. If we simply sit back and wallow in our sinfulness this does not do any good, nor does it do any good if we simply come up with a list of all the reasons why nothing is our fault. Understanding ourselves and the nature of our sin can be important, but it is important only to the extent that we are seeking to grow beyond this. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, but God understands this and only asks that we repent and return to him so that we may be his both now and forevermore.