

Sunday 14 May 2017 (5th Sunday of Easter)

St Andrew's Church, Cobham

Acts 7.55-end; 1 Peter 2.2- 10; John 14.1-14

The Blessing of Failure

This morning I would like to speak about failure. And by that, I mean spiritual failure - that moment when we fail to live up to the standard that Jesus asks of us.

It is that moment when we are going along happily, thinking we are doing OK in following Jesus, when suddenly we do or say something that shows us just how far away from Jesus we really are.

You will have realized that I am not talking about deliberate, calculated sin here, like lying on your tax return, or having an affair, that sort of thing.

It's the difference between Judas and Peter. Judas cold-heartedly planned his betrayal of Jesus. Peter's betrayal of Jesus in the courtyard was such a moment as I am talking of, when we are ambushed by an event and our defences are down, so that we can't hide our true state from ourselves.

The reason I am talking about this today is because I recently had just such an experience. I found myself in a pressured situation and instead of behaving with love, grace and wisdom, I opened my mouth and out came ... anger. It turned out I had been growing quite a nice little garden of judgment, with a pretty border of self-righteousness, and when the pressure was on, the garden gate was flung open for a public viewing.

That's the sort of thing we usually discover behind these moments. The cowardly act, the unkind word, the selfish action – they are symptoms of some state of sin that we have allowed to grow in us: resentment, self-pity, envy, fear, greed, pride, judgment, lust, you name it.

And the reason we have allowed these things to grow in us because we lack a particular thing.

What did Jesus say in the opening words of reading this morning?

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. [Jn 14.1]

In other translations, instead of the word 'believe' we find the word 'trust' [e.g. NIV] and that's the right word for this morning.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.

Trust.

The reason we find these unpleasant states in ourselves is because we don't put our trust in Jesus – or we don't put enough of our trust in Jesus. In other words, we lack faith. Every single one of those nasty sinful states that give rise to our bad behaviour under pressure can be traced back to is one simple thing - a lack of trust in God.

Try this exercise at home. Think back on the last time you failed our Lord. Then look for the thing that lay beneath that moment. Was it fear? Fear comes from not trusting God to look after us. Was it greed of some sort? Greed comes from not trusting God to give us what we need. Was it being judgmental, as in my case? That comes from not trusting God's command to love and leave the judging to Him.

My friends, the long and the short of it is that when we fail to behave like Christ, it's because we have failed to trust him. If we want to behave more like Christ, then the point is not to try and copy his behaviour, but to put all our trust in Him. When we do that our behaviour will change by itself.

But where does that leave us when we do fail? Those moments of failure can be crushing. How should we deal with them?

The answer is in our reading.

Jesus' words 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust in me also' follow on from the famous exchange between Peter and Jesus when Peter says, 'Lord, I will lay down my life for you,' and Jesus replies, 'Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows you will disown me three times!' [Jn 13.37b-38]

Jesus knew Peter loved him passionately but he also knew that poor Peter was about to fail spectacularly, out of fear.

It seems that the disciples were shocked at this prophecy, and Jesus is probably responding to their shock when he tells them to trust in God and in him.

And then he goes on to explain what he means by saying something deeply encouraging.

In my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. [Jn 14.2-3]

In other words, the first thing to remember when we fail is that we are still at home in God's house. We still belong to Jesus and he still loves us – very much. He knew that Peter was going to betray him, and yet he continued to love Peter totally.

But although we are still at home in God's house, we are also still on a journey deeper and deeper into the house, to the inner room where God is. And on that journey, there are dwelling places within the house.

The Greek word for 'dwelling place' ('monai') can also mean 'resting place' or a stage along the way. In those days, when people went on a long journey, there were shelters at stages along the road where the travellers could rest on their journey. Travellers often sent a servant ahead of them to prepare these resting places. This is what Jesus is saying here. We are all on a journey of deepening our faith, and Jesus goes ahead of us to prepare the way and welcome us at each stage.

We are all at different stages along the way, different resting places. When we fail, it is painful but it is also a precious opportunity, a call from God, to face up to the fact that our faith is lacking and it is time to move on to the next resting place in God's house.

We do this first by being courageous and facing up to things – to the fact that we have not trusted God. All we can do is to seek forgiveness from the person we have wronged, and from God, and then make a conscious, determined effort to place more of our trust in God.

The one thing we must not do is to become paralysed by our failure, beat ourselves up or fall into despair. When we do that, Satan will be sitting on the side-lines smiling to himself.

Failure is hard and painful but, praise God, it is also a wake-up call to follow Jesus ever deeper into God's house, where our Lord waits for us at each stage, holding out his hand, longing for us to arrive and loving us with each faltering step we take.

Amen.