

Introduction (Slide 2)

Heavy Topic, even for Lent

This subject that we have chosen for the Lent course this year has been difficult for some, and I include myself in that, so as we come to the last session, it is important that we end with some encouragements.

The beginning of living life in all its fullness

The first of those is that our repeated failures are the beginning of living life in all its fullness, as promised in John 10:10. A full life should not be confused with a busy life, as some of us do sometimes, but that's another study completely.

So let's take a look at what Emma has to say:

Live with the mess (Slide 3)

Firstly, we have to live with the mess. This is difficult for some of us who were attracted by the order that God provides.

Inevitable consequence of living

We must recognise though that this is an inevitable consequence of living in our fallen, failing world. There is no escape.

Teach Failure

Instead we should not just accept it, but embrace it. We should teach failure – not how to fail, but how to fail really well. Emma says:

“We serve our children and young people well if we teach them that failure belongs to everyone and that it is possible to be at once kind, clever, idiotic and controlled”

She talks about failure as a subject being added to parenting classes, and ‘failure parties’ in some companies where employees are encouraged to share what they got wrong and what they learnt from it. That would not work in the environments I worked in, but I can see there might be places where it could.

Learning how to deal with failure, especially for young people, helps them to develop resilience, so that they can cope better when things go monumentally wrong. That might be a failed exam, or something like that which sets them back. Resilience may also help with the current mental health crisis.

Nothing is outside God's providential care

Apparently the words of Genesis 1:2, formless, empty, darkness and deep, would have suggested a chaotic environment to the Israelites, that is not something I recognise. So, Emma speaks of chaos being in God's plan, even before the fall. That's as maybe, but it was certainly in God's plan after the fall, and He can use it to redeem any situation. If you want to know what chaos looks like, look at the reverse side of a tapestry. All the knots and ends of threads certainly don't give any indication of the picture that the front shows.

Adam Kuyper (Dutch Theologian) said "There is not a square inch (!?) in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all does not cry "Mine".

Make friends with the ordinary (Slide 4)

Extraordinary People

Most of life is quite boring, most of our failures aren't that dramatic. However, we are fed a diet of the extraordinary, both in the media and when listening to sermons – inspiring stories come from people who, by our standards are somehow special.

Gladys Hopkins

Her example of the ordinary is Gladys Hopkins, who was born and lived all her life in the same Welsh village, she had children, grand children, great grand children, and one great-great grandchild. She was faithful her whole life and served God in the same church the entire time. Her impact on those she knew and her family cannot be overestimated. She was a true hero of the faith.

At forging men we regularly hear from speakers who tell us of miraculous healings or incredible events that changed their lives. The stories are inspiring in a way, but I'm often left feeling that what happened to them will never happen to me – which I'm usually quite glad about. On one occasion though, we asked three of the regulars to give the story of their faith journey – 10 minutes each. For me it was one of the best evenings we've had – it was easier to relate to their stories.

When you 'get up and go' has 'got up and gone' (Slide 5)

One of the features of the pandemic was the constant deferral of hope. We expected lockdowns to end and to be over, but they were extended and

repeated. We longed to 'get back to normal', or at least 'get to the new normal'. We never did get back to normal, and we're still not sure what the new normal will be. It leads to a kind of apathy – "I don't care what happens next, I just want to get through it" we say.

Acedia (a new word to me, I always love a new word!) means 'a lack of interest or caring', but originally referred to the sin of sloth – one of the seven deadly sins.

Desert father John Cassian describes the behaviour of a monk suffering acedia.

"He looks about anxiously this way and that, and sighs that none of the brethren come and see him and often goes in and out of his cell, and frequently gazes up at the sun, as if it was too slow in setting, and so a kind of unreasonable confusion of mind takes possession of him like some foul darkness"

Perhaps it was acedia that afflicted the church in Laodicea - neither hot nor cold. The remedy, Emma says is to welcome Jesus into the mess, as He says:

3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Well, it sounds good, but what if you can't even be bothered to get out of the comfy chair while you're doom scrolling your favourite social media, to open the door?

I realised, reading this for the fifth or sixth time, that I've been there before, because this condition, to me, looks a lot like burn out. The remedy then was not welcoming Jesus, but having a minister all but insist I gave my testimony. That process – writing it – got me out of the metaphorical comfy chair, and as far as the door.

In every season (slide 6)

We all have our regrets, and I've just alluded to one of mine. Regrets can be for actions taken, or actions not taken, choices made or not made. So, my regrets, (I've had a few ...) at least those I'm prepared to share here are:

- 1) that spent too much time providing for my children (working) and not enough time being with them.
- 2) That I have been a townie all my life, when I really wanted to live in the countryside.

Regrets come with age, as you look back and realise that life has not taken the path that you set out for yourself. That you have not lived up to your ideals. Regrets can be instant as Peter found when he denied Jesus:

Luke 22:59 About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

⁶⁰ Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Or they can be much longer term, which is what we are talking about here. They generally come with ageing, which, itself is a kind of failure. As our bodies age, things begin to work less well, stop working altogether or get damaged and cannot be properly repaired.

We have to come to terms with our abilities being more limited than we would like or expect – we are the walking wounded.

Emma says:

I reckon there is a time, usually around 45 or 50 years old when you suddenly realise that there are no grown-ups any more, because now, apparently you are the grown up.

She was the youngest at her church for a long time, but now she sees younger, brighter people around all the time. She feels ill-equipped to deal with the role of being the adult.

Laura King and Joshua Hicks explain the maturity that comes with being grown up.

"maturity depends on the adult's capacity to confront lost goals, or lost possible selves, and acknowledge regrets and sorrows over roads not taken or dreams unfulfilled"

Being an Adult means taking responsibility but not allowing these failures to swamp us.

Let's remember God's promise in Romans 8:28:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Fail widely (learn to make different kinds of mistakes) (Slide 7)

Mostly we learn from our failures. Double check the bible references so that you don't end up preaching on the wrong passage is a lesson I have recently learnt. And I have – all through this preparation too. It's a simple lesson, and I'm sure one day I will forget it and repeat the mistake – but hopefully not too soon.

We all fail to take the lessons from our failures sometimes, which just leads to repeat failures.

The Bible is full of them apparently. You would think that Jacob would have learned from his childhood rejection not to have favourites, but his treatment of Joseph proves that he didn't. You can read about that from Genesis 37 onwards. (Yes, I've checked!) Emma has other examples, but they don't work as well, so we'll leave that there.

We also learn from the failures we perceive in our parents, and vow never to inflict those mistakes on our own offspring. But that leaves us open to loads of different mistakes to inflict on them.

Others will try to put things right. The failures they are addressing are rarely their own, but have seriously affected them or those close to them. Think of all the charities set up to campaign for changes in the law or support victims of particular crimes or diseases. So that others don't have to go through what we went through.

So we try to not make the same mistakes over and over, but even that is difficult. To do that we must recognise what Emma calls our besetting sins.

Know your besetting sins (Slide 8)

A besetting sin is one that we constantly struggle with and toward which we are naturally inclined. You might consider it a character flaw, but Emma is not that brutal, I am though (so there's your first example!).

The important thing is that we are sufficiently aware of how we operate to know what they are. That self-awareness gives us a starting point to avoid repeating those same mistakes, failures, or sins.

These mistakes, failures and sins also include our conscious and unconscious biases.

To help us deal with these it's helpful to have friends that will 'challenge the sins we have come to love'. Emma calls these 'Holy friendships', we might see them as mentors or spiritual advisors, or just a close friend who is willing to

challenge us about our actions. However you see them, they can help us get to the point where we can say

“When I, a decent, smart person, make a mistake, I remain a decent, smart person and the mistake remains a mistake. Now, how do I put it right?”

Allow others to fail (slide 9)

Of course, if we accept and come to terms with our own failures, we must also allow others to fail. Being open about our failures helps us and others. C. S. Lewis talks about friendship being born the moment one person says to another “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.”

It is difficult to share our failures and there aren't many safe spaces in which we can do that. If there were we may all be happier people than we are.

Recognising that we fail in just the same way as other people, makes it easier for us to forgive them their failures. It also makes us less likely to rush to judgement. I believe that's what Matthew 7:1-2 is trying to tell us:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

We should wait for the evidence. Carol Travers and Elliot Aronson advise:

We can try to balance sympathy and scepticism. And then we can learn to hold our conclusions lightly, lightly enough that we can let them go if justice demands we do so.

The same applies to our public figures. Hebrews 13:7

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

It says imitate their **faith**, not imitate their way of life.

To really allow others to fail, we need to love them. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13 say Love is ... patient. Patience is the first quality mentioned, we are told to let people fail, again and again. We must put up with one another's sins, mistakes, weaknesses and failures - sometime for a long time – to provide time for repentance.

Know how to lose an argument (slide 10)

Realising that you are wrong usually comes after an argument. So arguing is

an important skill, and one that Emma says we have lost. She is not talking about a spat, or perhaps a domestic argument, but arguments that are made from a reasonable set of facts.

This is sometimes called debate, and our ability to debate is limited by our means of communication. The use of SMS (Short Messaging Service) and various other forms of modern communication, leaves us open to misinterpretation. They also result in slogans rather than reasoned arguments based on a reasonable number of facts.

Living with slogans, leads to polarization – are you for or against the slogan, there is no room to answer ‘well ... yes and no’. All nuances are lost in the shouting match.

Christians, Emma says, should learn to argue well, or debate well. So the highest complement from someone who disagrees with you is not ‘You are right’ but ‘You made me think’.

Here’s a quote from Stephen Pinker, who says arguments are not to be won, but used to promote a wider understanding of the world.

“We can all promote reason by changing the mores of intellectual discussion, so people treat their beliefs as hypotheses to be tested rather than slogans to be defended”

Feel the fear and do it anyway (slide 11)

Fear of failure is every bit as serious as failure itself. It’s a natural fear, but it can lead to us not doing things, not taking risks, that we think we will be a failure at.

The C of E is planning lots of new worshipping communities. Here’s what a church planter said:

Knowing that I am a failure has also freed me from the fear of taking risks. I am by nature a risk-averse person. Doing an entrepreneurial assessment to see if I had the right temperament to be a church planter, I scored poorly. This hasn't stopped me being a church planter, though, because it doesn't feel like a risk. Knowing that I will fail means I don't need to fear failure. It is Christ who works in us and through us, so I can trust him and do what He has put before me. I will fail, but He will succeed in and through me.

How do you respond to that statement?

Play the fool (slide 12)

Humour helps us cope when things go wrong, by relieving the tension. It can also be a way of telling a truth that would be difficult to tell straight. In many of Shakespeare's plays the fool is the commentator and truth-teller.

"There used to be a day in the church calendar called the Feast of Fools, until it was eventually banned. On that occasion a child would be made bishop and fun would be poked at various ecclesiastical rituals."

There is an important role for fools in the Church — those who tell the truth and show up pomposity for what it is, with humour.

Failure is never final (slide 13)

Emma takes the list of faith heroes in Hebrews 11 and re-writes it along different lines:

by failure Noah got drunk and embarrassed himself in front of his children

by failure Abraham sold his wife to a despotic ruler to save himself

-- and the list goes on. Look it up later, all of them (well the ones we know enough about) without exception have had their failures, and all of them are commended for their faith in Hebrews.

God takes our mess and reconstructs it, just as the "Repair Shop" does for all the old loved artefacts.

Revelation 21:3-4

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Failure is part of the old order.

Conclusion (slide 14)

That's my (failed) summary of the last chapter of this book. There are been many things in the book that I have disagreed with, and still do. There have been things in this chapter that I have disagreed with, and I have found it quite heavy going, but it's not over yet, there are now some questions for discussion.