The Failing Church – Lent course 22.3.23

For anyone (like me) who has been finding the subject of failure a little on the heavy side, I thoroughly recommend one of my favourite books, *The Book of Heroic Failures* by Stephen Pile, available from Amazon.

Even though the author of the book on which this Lent course is based, Bishop Emma Ineson, states that on her worst days she "could cheerfully dump the whole [church] into the pits of hell to be tormented by the devil and all his little minions with their pitchforks for ever and ever, amen", we can find good reason to take a rather more upbeat approach to the subject!

All my life I have set great store by the value of **realism**: doing my best to look realistically at whatever situation I may be facing.

The only problem is that being realistic is often an uncomfortable place to be, which unfortunately happens to be true for us here in the Billericay and Little Burstead Team Ministry. You don't have to be a great mathematician, or even statistician, to work out that, given our current rate of growth/decline, together with the average age in our churches, if we project forward 30 years to 2053, the Team might comprise only one church, and that made up solely of elderly members. This is a depressing thought to contemplate, but, if we are Ostriches, and stick our heads in the sand, it is difficult to see any other outcome. (It should be made clear that our Team is not unusual: Anglican churches all over this country are facing the same disturbing challenges.)

But it does not have to be like this! I believe absolutely that, if we face up realistically to our situation, not ducking our difficulties and failings, but facing them head-on – and, most importantly – giving them to God in prayer, then there is no limit to what God can do.

Another key factor in turning decline and failure around, according to Emma Ineson, is the importance of fostering and encouraging innovation and experimentation. We have to be willing to try new things, instead of hoping that 'the old ways' will inexplicably suddenly start to work again. However, according to Ineson, there is too often a culture of what she calls "performance anxiety", the fear that if we try something new and it doesn't work, criticism will fall on us and crush us like a ton of bricks.

Instead, we need to foster a culture where it is not only ok, but *positively encouraged*, to try new things – and where it`s ok for the new things to fail; *but we must try.* The problem is so often that, of course, new things involve **change** – and if you want to create upset in the Anglican church, the quickest and most sure-fire route is to introduce a change. Our *culture* has to change, so that change is welcomed and embraced when it is needed.

But if we limit our discussion of the failing church to falling numbers and a rapidly rising average age, then we are only tackling one part of the 'failure issue'. Ineson points out that, as important as *what* the church does is, *how* we do it is just as important.

The Bible could not make it clearer that, even if a church is successful at 'pulling people in', if the life of the church is not characterised by love, then it has missed what is in God`s eyes the single most important element of its corporate life: love (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3). How kindly do we treat people?
How patient are we with others. I am sad to have to acknowledge that, as a Vicar, I have been spoken to unkindly more times than I care to remember – by purely human, let alone biblical, standards. Equally, I recently received an e-mail from someone in a church for which I am responsible to tell me that *my* behaviour had been unacceptable. We all have to ensure that our own house is in order.

The life of following after Jesus, which we have elected to live, is a cycle of learning and growing, learning and growing – which inevitably means that failure will be in there somewhere – though ultimately the only real failure is to fail to learn from getting it wrong. When we stop learning, we really do need to worry.

I will leave the last word to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but before that, it would be remiss of me to fail to remind us all that there is no 'perfect church' somewhere out there; just the one we belong to. And the old advice still holds good: if you do happen to find the perfect church, whatever you do, don`t join it, as you'll only spoil it! We should also remember the little fact that all the apostle Paul's letters *and* the letters to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, were written to address failings in the churches to which they were addressed. If the church had never failed, our Bible would be a much smaller version of the one we currently have.

Finally, as promised, here is Justin Welby to remind us that "the Bible is above all a story of failure redeemed, failure forgiven, failure overcome in resurrection and merciful judgement" (from the foreword to *Failure* by Emma Ineson, p.ix).

To chew over

How would you say failure is treated in the Bible?

We have been talking solely about *failing* churches; what might a *successful* church look like?

How should we evaluate whether a church is failing or successful?

The sixth paragraph on the first page above discusses "the importance of fostering and encouraging innovation and experimentation." Why are these things important, and what might they look like in our church life?

Do you think there is "performance anxiety" (same paragraph above) in your church? Why or why not?

Some might say that the church is failing numerically because we do the same things we've always done, hoping that 'this time they will somehow work.' The church is well known for being averse to change. Why do you think this is? How do *you* react to change? If you don't like it, why do you think this is?

To what extent has your church succeeded in being a community with love at the centre?