

Dust And Glory Rethinking Success and Failure

Team Lent Course

Wednesday 1 March 2023

Emmanuel Church, Billericay

1. Acknowledging Our Past Failures

The Archbishop of Canterbury has apologized on several occasions on behalf of the CofE, whether it's the ethnic or LGBT+ community or the indigenous Inuit's of Canada. And, whilst the failings the Archbishop refers to provoke much media attention, most failures go unnoticed.

For example. I served my curacy in Handforth, Cheshire (made famous by the Jackie Weaver viral video!). We lived on the Spath Lane Estate - a Manchester overspill Council Estate. The church had placed the curates house there but had never made any positive inroads into the community. It seemed to be a case of 'you come to us' ... so I decided we'd go to them. I established a positive relationship with the local primary school, took regular assemblies; became a 'friend of the school' and we were able to use the school for our children's summer holiday club as well as setting up a weekly Saturday morning kingz klub. 100's of children, literally, came who would never attend the church. We visited these children every week and this brought us into regular contact with their families.

There were very few amenities on this estate – apart from a pub and three police houses and a holding cell (which happened to be my study when the Diocese bought one of the houses for the curate!). This always amused me – especially after my time in the Prison Service. We began to explore the idea of renting a boarded-up shop as a café (Paula's vision), which we did, and it was open for 15 years before the buildings were demolished. I became an 'active' chaplain to the British Legion which helped break down some barriers. I also became a member of a management committee set up to oversee the changeover from council tenancy to a Housing Association.

But despite the fact that these initiatives were well received, something seemed to be holding things back and no-one in the church was able to put the finger on 'why?' Around this time, I attended an Anglican Renewal Ministries conference where Russ Parker (then director of the *Acorn* Healing Trust) was talking about a book he had just written: 'Healing Wounded History.'

He was talking about situations where knowledge and understanding of past failings of a church have an impact on the life of a community in the present (Deuteronomy 28 etc.). Spurred on by this, I began to do some research into the history of the estate, to see if I could find anything that would be helpful.

I found out that 30 years before, nearly 80% of the population of 'old' Handforth had signed a petition against the estate being built. I also found out that a meeting had taken place in Saint Chad's - because it was the largest building in the community at that time – where one of the Churchwardens, a retired Major had said: 'We don't want their riff raff here' – it became the headline in the Manchester Evening News.

As you can imagine, people moved onto this estate with a huge amount of anger; suspicion and distrust towards the church and the wider community and this was passed on from generation to generation. No one wanted to be married or have their funeral services in church. As far as they were concerned, the church didn't exist – though some began, albeit slowly, to appreciate all that we were trying to do for them and their children.

A public meeting was called by the Housing Association, and, because of my experience/knowledge of the local community, I was invited to speak. The primary school had 600+ present in the hall and when it was my turn, a 'negative' murmur went round the hall (Daniel in the Lion's Den!).

Rather than give my prepared talk, I felt as though God was saying to me that I should apologise for the past and for what the church had and hadn't done over the years. And so, I asked for their forgiveness for the mistakes we'd made and how we wanted to put that right and play an active part in their community. I also pledged to do all we could in the future to work alongside them. When I finished my talk, I received an emotional round of applause and the rest, as they say, is history. The change was quite remarkable and heralded a new beginning for the congregation and community. I was pretty sad when my curacy came to an end and I wasn't able to build on the work I started.

Sometimes confessing the failures of the past is a way to bring healing. What is to be our stance in relation to the failings of our Church, our society, humanity as a whole? Sometimes it seems as though we do failure well. We acknowledge, we apologize, we repent, we learn. Other times we don't.

2. The Reality Of Failure

Sometimes it seems as though life is just one long series of failures, and we can begin to feel weary in our very souls. The trouble is, we can never escape from failure. We can try very hard to do better all the time, but the fact is, failure is here to stay - because sin is here to stay. Ever since Eve said to Adam in the garden of Eden, 'Hey, try some of this!', human beings have been failing.

Perhaps the reality of failure is something like that. Try as hard as we might to limit, escape or avoid failure, we can't remove it. Perhaps the knack is to learn to live with it, to take different approaches to failure, to attempt to avoid the worst kinds and to find ways to diminish its effects. As Joe Moran says:

We can no more escape failure than protect ourselves entirely from any other contagion, and for the same reason: no one ever made themselves immune to other people. We like to see ourselves as sovereign entities that succeed or fail under their own steam. Failure is the virus we hope never to catch, but it has too many strains for us to escape it indefinitely. Sooner or later in the chickenpox party of life, everyone catches failure from everyone else.

Life is lived with a constant feeling of failure. Every day, when I look in the mirror, I see the ways in which my body is failing and the aspects of my physical appearance that I am less than delighted with. Every time I open my email inbox or open a letter, I wonder who will be writing to me about something I've failed in or a sermon they disagree with.

Every time I lead or preach I'm conscious of what doesn't go right or how things might be better or who is missing! Every time I turn on my TV or open my news app, I see the failures of the world enacted on a global scale. Failure is the wallpaper of life – so we'd better get used to it.

3. The Fear Of Failure

Looking failure full in the face is a good idea from the perspective of organizational health too. Evidence shows that an organization which embraces the reality of failure and tries not to avoid it completely (for that is not possible) but to learn from it when it happens, is likely to be an organisation where people are unafraid to take risks and greater progress is made as a result. I see that watching the young lads playing for SAFC – with an average age of 22 they play with no fear!

Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, has made it her life's work to study failure and to help organizations become better at dealing with it. The biggest problem, she says, is fear of failure. A culture that asks immediately, when something goes wrong, 'Whose fault is this and how should they be punished?' is a culture in which people will be afraid to risk trying anything new at all for fear it will go wrong and they will be blamed if it fails. Sounds a lot like the CofE of the C21st.

If, however, the culture is to encourage risk-taking and, therefore, the right kind of mistake-making - not to hide failure but recognize that everyone fails sometimes, failure need not be final and all failure can be used as a tool for learning and improvement - that is an organization where appropriate risks can be taken and progress will result.

4. Failure And Social Media

All this failure is invariably lived out in the public glare, most often on social media. We human beings have a morbid fascination with failures, errors, mistakes and disasters. How often do we see traffic jams caused not by the accident on the motorway itself but by people slowing down on the other side of the road to gawp at the wreckage?

When a public figure falls from grace the 'Twitterati' are quick to jump in with their own words of contempt, horror and indignation that such a person should have done such a thing, or else that such a person should be accused in this way, depending on their viewpoints. All this does not make for a nuanced approach to failure. A book published by the School of Life ('an organisation built to help us find calm, self-understanding, resilience and connection-especially during troubled times') entitled *On Failure* highlights the problem:

The internet has become an eternal charge sheet and bulletin board of every human being's record of disgrace, failure and idiocy. Twenty years after an infraction, the internet still reminds everyone about what we did and how others judged it-and the misdemeanour is as shocking and disappointing as it ever was.

I'm glad social media wasn't around when I was a teenager - goodness knows what might come back to haunt me of things I could have said before I was a Christian.

I did become infamous in 2013 when I wrote a letter to the Church of England Newspaper advocating the disestablishment of the CofE as a result of the introduction of same sex marriage – hoping to provoke a debate. It did, but not in the Church press but on the National Secular Society’s website! I may write again given the current situation! In fact, if folk had heeded my prophetic words, we wouldn’t be in the situation we are now!

Social Media makes it more and more difficult to move on from our failures, or even the things we have done that are inadvisable or we would do differently now, or that we regret or have learnt from, because there is a permanent record of them on the Internet. God may take your sins and misdemeanours and put them in the deepest sea, but anyone with a search engine can fish them out again and serve them to you for breakfast.

5. How Do We Live With Failure?

How do we live with failure, rather than expect to avoid it and make it all go away? There are many, many books written about failure. Most of them seem to suggest that failure is simply another step on the pathway to success. They have titles such as:

From Failure to Success: Everyday habits and exercises to build mental resilience and turn failures into successes, Failure Is Not Final: Motivational truths and strategies to cultivate success, Chasing Failure: How falling short sets you up for success, How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big and Adapt: Why success always starts with failure. All very ... motivational.

New York Times bestselling author John C. Maxwell in his book, *Failing Forward: Turning mistakes into stepping stones for success*, recognizes failure as a natural and inevitable part of life- “Everybody fails, errs and makes mistakes yet the book frames failure as something that is inevitable on the road to success: “Failure is simply a price we pay to achieve success.”

This Lent Course aims to ask some questions about how we live with failure. What is it? How do we live well with it? What does God think about it? What do people think about the Church and failure? How do Christians think about failure? What happens when your get up and go has got up and gone, your energy to learn from failure is at its lowest ebb and failure seems to be the default for humanity? How do we live well with that?

6. Failure And Lent

Lent is a great time to think about our failures, because it’s the season when we’re supposed to examine ourselves and see where we’re lacking. But let’s be careful how we approach this. During Lent, quite rightly, we bring our failures to mind and to the attention of a loving God who is always readier to forgive us than we are to repent.

Sometimes, though, it’s tempting to treat Lent itself as something that we should be hugely successful at. I may try really hard to give up chocolate or swearing, and find myself very smug if I get to the end of a week without indulging in either. Alternatively, I may become despondent if I happen to slip up in the scrupulousness of the spiritual disciplines I have set myself. J McDermott says:

I wonder if a certain sense of failure during Lent is actually a good thing. In part, it reminds us that Lent is not a home renovation show. The primary goal of the season is not self-improvement; we are not here to fix up our own personal backslash. We are trying to open ourselves to a deeper relationship with our friend and saviour, Jesus.

Above all, Lent is a time when we are encouraged to turn to God and God’s word in the Bible and allow it to be reflected in our own lives to enable us to see ourselves as we really are. The problem is that the Bible is not the first place many people turn to today when looking for solutions to the problem of failure or even simply for comfort.

7. Embracing Failure

We say that we should embrace failure and learn from it, but the story of God and his people is rarely one in which abject failure is turned into rip-roaring success. The Bible reframes what we think of as success and failure. The story we see most commonly is apparent success followed by failure and eventual redemption, but not in the ways originally expected.

- The success of creation-the pinnacle of which is humankind-is followed by the failure of the fall and banishment from the garden.
- The success of the flight from Egypt is followed by forty years of failure and wandering in the desert.

- The success of the Law being given to Moses on the mountaintop is followed by the failure of God's people to make do with anything other than a golden calf to worship.
- The success of the promised land is followed by the failure of exile.
- The successful King David is followed by his own moral failure.
- The success of Jesus' ministry is followed by apparent failure on the cross.
- The success of God's Holy Spirit being poured out on all people is followed by the story of the Church being persecuted and scattered.
- The success of Pentecost is followed by 2,000 Years of the fallible Church dividing and splitting and sinning and failing, even as it grows and spreads.

8. Failure As Part Of Life

Is failure really something you encounter on the road to success or is it more often the other way round? Rather than seeing failure as the path to success, maybe we ought to see it as part and parcel of life. We can ask what we'll learn from it, of course, but perhaps more than that, we ought to accept it, reflect on it, think carefully about it and aim to fail miserably. Rather than asking how we get through it, instead we could ask what God is doing in and through it.

The COVID years have caused us to shift our views on what constitutes success and failure. We have reimagined success. Perhaps we've lowered our expectations a little and now feel more comfortable living in the mess. It's acceptable for parents to collect their children from school in their pyjamas or to wear shorts at Zoom meetings. At one point during the pandemic, the people viewed as really successful, our heroes, weren't the bankers and stockbrokers, but key workers - front-line health care workers bin collectors, delivery drivers. They were the people who kept us going and we applauded them on our doorsteps.

Perhaps Lent is a good time for us to rethink success and failure.

Questions for discussion and reflection

1. What is failure?
2. How do you live well with failure?
3. What does God think about failure?
4. What do people think about the Church and failure?
5. How do Christians think about failure?
6. In what ways does society's judgement of failure influence you?
7. What kinds of failure are you most aware of at the moment, in your own life and that of others?