

Failure

We have all, at some stage, in our lives had to live with failure; whether big or small; unimportant or devastating. We have experienced it, and most of us hate it. The fear of failure has the potential to cripple us. We looked at this in session two of these studies; it is often easier not to try than to risk failure.

But, sometimes the 'failure' springs upon us, without our thinking too much about it. We do something, we act in a particular way and then realise our failure. In that case, for some, it is not an unwillingness to risk failure, which cripples our progress, it is the remembrance of past failure.

There is a very close connection between this failure and the 'sin', the 'badness', we looked at in the last session. But, maybe, there is a slight difference. Both David and Zacchaeus knew what they were doing; it was, for both of them, deliberate and pre-meditated. It's as though they did not care - until they were 'caught'. Even now we tend to have very little sympathy with the habitual criminal who only says 'sorry' when he or she is caught! But sometimes our 'sin' is not so deliberate. It springs from a moment of passion: I swear at the crazy driver who has just swerved in front of me (but, amazingly, am always justified when I do the same!) I tell a lie, without even thinking, to try to avoid trouble, or shame or consequences. I act in the way I want to, justifying what I do by arguing that it is right, it is what God would want. The time will come, as it always does, when I will have to admit what I have done - and then work out how to go on.

- *Think about these two different sorts of sin - deliberate and non-deliberate. Which are worse? Which do you 'do' most?*

We also find it very difficult to hear that we might be wrong. For all our fine words about accepting criticism, about being open to having our views changed, we seem to hate it when the error of our ways is pointed out to us. We become defensive; we attack our critic. We feel the burning shame of censure. Yet, sometimes we are wrong. Sometimes the things that we held to so tightly are shown to be false; how we grow will depend on how we react to criticism - as well as how the criticism is given!

- *Think of times in your life when you have been criticised. How did you feel at the time? How do you feel now, especially if the criticism was justified?*

We will look briefly at two examples, both from the New Testament, which might make it all clearer.

Paul

The Apostle Paul was the best of the best - even before he became an Apostle - and he knew it. A full-blooded Jew with impeccable credentials: the pupil of one of the greatest Rabbis; a Pharisee (which meant that not only did he know the Law, he knew it off by heart - and knew every possible interpretation of it! He was fluent in Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew. Even as a young man he was ambitious. And he was

certain. Certain of himself; certain of his religion; certain that he was right. So certain that he was willing to take part in the execution of those who disagreed with him.

- *Think of our world today. Think of those who are so fixed in their beliefs, their interpretations, that they cause untold pain and suffering. We tend to ask, How can people be so wrong? Yet, they ask the same of us!*

Paul's change, his conversion, was sudden and dramatic, at least for him! (Acts 9). He was confronted in some way by the Risen Jesus, and is made blind.

- *Think about this for a moment - what might be the significance of Paul being struck blind?*

From what we can piece together, from Acts and also from Paul's own description of events in Galatians, Paul had to spend quite a while thinking not only about what happened, but also about what it meant to him. Everything that he had been so sure about had been turned upside down, had been questioned. The people he had righteously persecuted - had helped to kill - he now believed to be right.

We can only imagine how he must have felt and what it took to go to his previous enemies and admit that he was wrong. Great shame; great fear. And always the nagging doubt: *If I was wrong once, might I not be wrong again?*

But imagine how he must have felt before God, admitting that he had never really been open to the possibility that he might have misinterpreted things. How he had thought of himself as being an authority on what God wanted but was now a beginner. Probably a real feeling of unworthiness. Yet, God takes that and makes him the greatest of all the Apostles!

Think about your own faith. How much do you continue to strive to find out the truth about God? Or are you comfortable with where you are now? How willing are you to develop - even change - what you believe? Are there some beliefs that you cannot change?

- *Have you ever had a conversion experience?*

Peter

Poor old Saint Peter. Chosen as the earliest leader of the greatest religion to hit planet earth, revered by that faith throughout its history yet receiving such bad press in the original documents. Impetuous; not the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Always willing to try, but always able, it seems, to get things wrong. The first to stand strong in defence of Jesus, until the bad stuff actually hits the fan and then his great resolve collapses! How he must have felt about all of this later as he relived those failures, remembering how unworthy he was!

There is a tradition that Peter was the one who told his story to Mark, which explains a lot of the small details added into Mark's Gospel. But at one point it feels like a confession, as the shame wells up in him. When the cock crows, and Peter realises

that he has denied Jesus, as Jesus had predicted, "he went out and wept bitterly."
(Luke 22:62)

Every year we hear this story; every year Peter's shame is once again held up to public view. Yet, would we have done any differently? In all that confusion, all that fear, would we have stood proud and announced to the authorities that we were with the man they desperately want to kill? Maybe not. Maybe we would justify not doing so. It would be foolish; it would do no good; it would give us the chance to act later. It is very hard to really blame Peter.

- *Have we ever denied Christ? Have we ever failed to speak up for Christ, remaining silent about our faith? Was Peter so bad?*

Peter obviously thought that he was. The story of the denial is repeated in each of the Gospels; his is a very public shaming within the Church, and he obviously did not try to hide from it. After the crucifixion he, like the other disciples, is in hiding; his cockiness, his impetuosity gone. Fear; doubt; and shame. His failure to speak up for the one he loved and who loved him. The strength that he thought he had now shown to be the usual weakness of humanity.

- *Read John 20 & 21*

In chapter 20, the period just after the Resurrection, Peter seems to fade into the background. Others become the more important characters. Why do you think that might be?

It all changes in chapter 21, when he is once again confronted by Jesus, and is restored; not just forgiven, but set on the mission which will be his. The failure is not forgotten or removed; Peter will have to live with the reality of it. But he reaches the point of being able to talk about what he did in order to help others. Not only is he shown to be fully human, but also many people can have respect for people who have failed, who can show their own faults. Looking back on his past might well have made him a better leader.

Neither of these characters, Peter and Paul, is special. Like so many others in the Bible, we can recognise their faults and failings. We can often see that we share those with them. On the face of it, both are worth no more than anyone else. Like David and Zacchaeus, one could think that they have possibly not quite put themselves beyond the pale, but would certainly not be in line for promotion. Imagine how the early Christians must have felt when they heard that Saul had become one of them. Would they trust him? Would they believe him? Imagine Peter, as leader of the Church, having to constantly live with people saying, "Who are you to criticise us - we know what you did?" And having the humility to know how true that was, and how he had no right in himself to be in the position that he was. He was in that position, as was Paul, as was David, because God made him worthy.