

When We Fail

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 13 July 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Romans 8:1-11 and St Matthew 13:1-9,18-23.

Children's talks, an unfortunate 19th century invention, were first introduced into services of worship by British nonconformists. The idea was that such talks would serve to build youngsters into the life of the Church.

Still encountered in many places, they are not having very spectacular success. Rather than turning children into Christians, they're more likely I suspect to be turning Christians into children. At any rate, I've never been a great fan of children's addresses. No doubt that's one reason I've never been much good at delivering them.

So it was with trepidation, starting my last job in Hong Kong, that I discovered the pastor of Kowloon Union Church was expected to come up with a "family talk" each Sunday. Ever a coward, I managed to palm the job off, on most Sundays, on to professional teachers and others in the congregation who were more adept at talking to kids than I would ever be.

They were good communicators. Some were brilliant, usually linking their talks with the Bible readings and sermon that were to follow. But sometimes I could not avoid it and the family talk fell, inescapably, to me.

One such occasion turned into a memorable disaster. The gospel for the day was the passage we have just heard: Jesus talking about different responses to his message, using a story about seeds as his analogy.

So, what to do for the family talk? Hmm, seeds. I decided to be creative. The church's caretaker found me a big pot full of soil and a packet of seeds. Sunday dawned. At the appropriate point in the service the kids came forward and parked themselves on the chancel steps, and the congregation settled back to enjoy the scene.

We went to work. I produced the seeds. Should we scatter them in Kowloon Park, I asked. No, said the kids, the birds would get them. How about scattering them out front, in Jordan Road. No, they said, the buses would squash them. Then, I suggested, why don't we scatter some in the pot of soil, and we'll come back next Sunday and see how they're going? Good idea, said the kids. So we did.

The seeds were scattered, a youngster watered them, and I was just about to launch into my pitch. Suddenly, there was movement in the soil. "Look!" shrieked a young voice right into my hand-held microphone. "It's a worm. And it's really wriggling!" The kids were entranced. The congregation was in stitches. The pastor was in confusion. St Matthew's gospel was forgotten. Upstaged by a worm!

Only later did the penny drop. I realised that my family talk fiasco, unintentionally, had exemplified rather well what the gospel reading was all about: namely, the problem of failure.

Failure was a problem for those early Christians. It worried them, a lot. They pondered the failure of Jesus -- rejected and crucified. They saw the failure of the disciples -- slow to understand and hesitant to follow. They knew the failure of the early Church -- fragile and sometimes divided.

The saviour had come, but most people weren't responding. The good news was being proclaimed, but most just didn't want to know. This was not supposed to happen, not what Jesus' friends were expecting. Something had gone very seriously wrong.

The concern about failure surfaces at various points in the early Christian writings. It lies behind this morning's parable of the sower. Seed is freely scattered. It should flourish but it doesn't. Why?

That puzzle was not restricted to the days of the biblical writers. It has resurfaced many times since, a recurring part of the Church's experience. It's not just a matter of influence declining or membership statistics going down. Think of the times when Christian unity has been torn apart by conflict. When Christianity almost disappeared from some of its great centres, like North Africa and today's Turkey. When the Church betrayed its Lord by blessing warfare, embracing racism, subordinating women, promoting homophobia, going along with injustice, lining up uncritically alongside the ruling class. Failed!

It's not just a matter of the failures out there, at a distance from where we sit. Failures also happen here, in local congregations. Conflicts ... personality clashes ... power plays ... hasty words. We don't mean to hurt each other but sometimes we do, the scars remain and a congregation is left with the inescapable feeling that somehow it has lost the plot. Failed again!

Christians have known failure repeatedly through the centuries. We know it still. And still we wonder how to understand what we know should not happen. Let's look more closely at Jesus' parable. Maybe it can help us.

Start with what the parable does *not* say.

First, Jesus does not suggest any defect in the seed. He doesn't say the sower should have tossed out his bag of seed and replaced it with a new product that would be more successful.

Second, he does not say the sower was at fault. True, other farming methods might have generated a better crop, but he was doing what every sower did in those days. The story implies no criticism of him.

Third, even the birds, rocks, scorching sun and thorns get off pretty lightly. Yes, they were inhibiting a 100% successful crop. And yes, unflattering connections between them and the gospel's unresponsive hearers invite us to consider: what kind of soil are we? Yet even they don't seem to be the story's principal targets.

Finally, there is no suggestion that the harvest has failed, that the sower should call it quits and go home. A despairing "give up" is not the message here.

What is the parable urging upon us, positively?

Jesus seems to be saying: that's how things happen, when God is in charge. With my message as with seeds, there will be mixed responses. There will be flourishing and there will be failure. It's par for the course. That's the way the world works. When the bad times come, do not let them overwhelm you. Never allow what looks like a lack of success to weaken your confidence in what I am on about. Trust the promises and purposes of God.

Translate that to our situation today.

In China, in the 1970s the cultural revolution was in full swing. Chaos reigned and people suffered. Churches were being closed, Christians harassed, schools and hospitals confiscated, missionaries expelled. Christianity in China, it seemed, faced extinction. Fast forward four decades and we see it thriving: around fifty million Christians and growing fast, with some predicting that before long China will have more Christians than anywhere else on the face of the earth. Failure and success, intertwined.

The Church in some parts of the world – Africa, at the moment – enjoys success. In others – Europe and Australia, at the moment – it sees failure. Some denominations thrive currently. Others currently don't. Congregations go up and down like yo-yos. And as for the Church's performance on social issues, it hasn't only tolerated warmongering, racism, sexism, homophobia and the exploitation of the poor. It has also fought these evils. Our record is mixed, not as good as Christians would like to claim but better than our secular critics like to admit.

What the situation might be in another decade, or another century, God only knows. All we can safely predict is that, for the Christian faith everywhere, the Church's performance will remain mixed, and things will keep changing. As Adam said to Eve, we live in a time of transition.

So beware of becoming fixated on statistics and trends. Don't get too depressed by apparent lack of success, or too excited about apparent success. Both are only *apparent*, both happen for complex reasons most of which are beyond our control, and both are transitory. That's life, par for the course.

That's what happens when seed is scattered.

Of course, the failures that trouble us most are not the things that go wrong, far away in the wider Church. Or even the glitches nearer at hand, in our local congregations. They are the failures *here*, in our own hearts and lives.

Paul was talking about them in today's first reading. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," he wrote. Yes, under the Law we do fail, repeatedly, but in Christ we are accepted by the divine love.

In 1972, Thomas Harris wrote a self-help book that became an instant best-seller. Its title, like its contents, was intended to make everyone feel good. The title was *I'm OK. You're OK*. Then someone wrote a much more realistic, down-to-earth response from the perspective of the Christian faith. Its title was an improvement too: *I'm not OK. You're not OK. But that's OK!* The man who wrote the letter to the Romans would have approved.

That is the gospel. We are loved and accepted -- not for what we could be, should be, might wish to be, but simply for who we are. Never let any failure, however great, whether real or imagined, blind you to that fact.

Failure? Yes, it happens. Failures? Yes, that's us. Separately and together, we are not OK and we know it. But that's OK! The all-forgiving love that went to a

cross is risen, has conquered, and now reigns in glory. It has not failed. Nor will it. Ever.

Thanks be to God.

*