

Failed yet Precious, Ordinary yet Special

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 1 March 2015, by David Gill. Readings for the second Sunday in Lent were Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 and St Mark 8:31-38.

Last Sunday, we started Lent in the first chapter of St Mark's gospel. Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, before he emerged and started calling people to repent -- turn themselves around -- and get ready for the rule of God.

Today, jumping forward eight chapters, we find ourselves midway through Mark's story. In the meantime a lot has happened. Jesus has gathered disciples and sent them out. He has preached and healed. He has fed the multitudes twice. He is in conflict with religious leaders. He has been creating quite a stir.

Now he turns his face towards Jerusalem. And he experiences another moment of temptation. The tempter is, of all people, his friend Peter.

Immediately before the gospel passage we heard this morning, Jesus had put a question to the disciples. "Who do people say that I am?" he asked them. Well, came the response, some say that you are John the Baptist back from the dead. Others think you're that great man Elijah, or one of the other prophets.

Then the question gets personal. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, the leader of the pack, speaks for them all. "You are the Messiah (or the Christ)". The words imply recognition, devotion, obedience. So far so good. But the next minute everything goes pear-shaped. This is where today's reading starts.

Jesus starts to tell them, very frankly, that the way ahead is going to be tough. For him, it will involve suffering, rejection and death. His followers are shocked. Peter takes him aside. No no no Lord, he says. This cannot be. You are the Messiah, the man we've been waiting for, the one who will lead your people into the new age God has promised. Suffering, rejection, death? Not possible. Yours is to be the way of earthly glory, visible power, unchallengeable authority.

And Jesus' response? He turns, fixes his eyes on the disciples, and gives Peter the roasting of his life: "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It's the wilderness story, all over again. Jesus' temptation to serve God in an easier, more appealing way was not just a one-off battle he fought at the beginning of his work. The temptation seems to have stayed with him. Perhaps that explains the strength of his reaction.

Poor Peter! What a reprimand he received. “Get behind me, Satan!” Imagine if your boss spoke to you in those terms. You would start looking for a new job.

But Jesus is not just another boss, and his community is not just another organisation. The Church is different. It doesn’t throw people out because they are failures. It *depends* on people who are failures.

Think about it. The bible is full of failures. One of my Facebook friends compiled the following list: Adam and Eve messed up everything, Jacob was a cheater, David was an adulterer and worse, Noah got drunk, Jonah ran away from God, Paul was a murderer, Miriam was a gossip, Martha was a worrier, the disciples were always getting things wrong, Sarah was impatient, Elijah was moody, Zacchaeus was short, Abraham was old. And Lazarus was dead!

Damaged goods, all of them. Yet they all played vital roles in the divine drama.

Think of the great Christian figures since biblical days. They’ve had feet of clay too.

In a few minutes we will sing “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds”. The author, John Newton, also gave us “Amazing grace,” “Glorious things of thee are spoken” and other much loved hymns. But did you know the man who wrote these beautiful words was once captain of a slave ship?

Mother Theresa is revered for her compassionate care for the poor. Did you know she endured long periods of spiritual darkness and despair?

We celebrate the saints, and rightly so. But don’t forget, those saints were damaged goods too.

As are we. There was room in the purposes of God for them. And there is room in the purposes of God for each of us. It’s not just that God *puts up with* human defects. God actually *uses* our defects in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Andrew Chan, in Bali’s Kerobokan Prison, probably has ministered to his companions on death row more effectively than any outsider ever could. John Newton used his knowledge of the slave trade to campaign with William Wilberforce against it. Damaged goods we may be, but our scars and bruises may be hidden blessings, opportunities for special kinds of Christian service that are just waiting to be discovered.

You’re not perfect? Good. Join the club – otherwise known as the Church! God has work for imperfect people like us.

That work starts, of course, with accepting each other. Warts and all. That is what God does for us. It's what the gospel liberates us to do for one another. But, alas, we're not always very good at it.

Many years ago, as a student, I spent my university vacation as student pastor of a Congregational church in upcountry NSW. There had been conflict in the congregation. The minister had left in a cloud of dust. At the ripe old age of 21, my job was to bring about some healing. I preached about compassion, how we've all sinned and nobody can feel superior to anyone else, about God's forgiveness and how we're all called to learn the same art.

I thought we were making progress, until on my last day the leader of one of the factions come up, shook my hand and said "Thanks David. All that stuff you've told us about forgiveness – it's just what they needed to hear". *They!* Failed again!

We all do it: I am forgiven, so thanks be to God. But don't ask me to forgive someone else, that's too hard. Here's a good Lenten discipline for us all. If there is anyone here with whom you have been at odds, for any reason at all, Lent is the time to do something about it. Fix that fractured relationship. Before Holy Week, please. If that sounds like a tall order, ask God for help. After all, God knows a lot about difficult forgiving. It's one of his specialties.

What Jesus said to failed Peter, to the failed disciples, to failed believers through twenty centuries, he also says to us. There is a new day dawning, the day of God's rule, the day of self-giving love. Get with it. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow.

Yes, we're very ordinary human beings, but so what? In a few minutes we will be reminded that Jesus took ordinary bread and wine, using them to be present to his friends. Just as he took ordinary people, asking them to follow.

He made the ordinary special, the damaged whole, the broken precious. He cherished failures as his friends. He wanted the most unlikely people to be his companions.

And he still does.

Thanks be to God.

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