



We fail to keep our promises  
to one another and to God.  
We all fail.  
It is part of what we do.

So the questions mount up.  
Why do we fail?  
Is failure always a bad thing?  
How do we cope with failure,  
either our own or someone else's?  
What do you do when failure stares you in the face?  
Where do you go?  
How do you recover?

It has been said that in engineering,  
we learn by failure.  
One of the first bridges to be built out of glass fibre  
failed during construction.  
An enormous amount was learnt from that.  
And so we could go on.

But how do *we* react?  
Do we confront our failures,  
or do we hide them or run away?

Personally,  
I dread failure.  
I hate it in myself.  
I work hard and do my best not to fail.  
And if I do fail,  
I find it very hard to admit and to accept.

Failure of others is different.  
I can't control them  
and I find other people's failures much easier to accept.

So let's have a look at this passage and see what is going on.

Peter, James and John, the leading three disciples,  
have been up the mountain with Jesus,  
and seen the most amazing revelation of his glory.  
There in front of their very eyes,  
they had seen Him in all his glory conversing with Moses and Elijah.

But as they come down to the village,  
they find the nine remaining disciples in trouble.  
A large crowd is gathering around them  
And they are arguing with the teachers of the law.

At the centre of the confusion is a man

and his epileptic son.  
He had come to the disciples,  
hoping to find Jesus.  
But as he wasn't there  
the disciples had attempted to exorcise the demon,  
but they had failed.

When Jesus arrives on the scene,  
the crowd immediately turn their attention to him.  
Mark says they “were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.” (Mark 9:13)  
It reminds me of when Moses came down from the mountain having been with God  
and his face shone so much that the people couldn't look at him.  
Jesus had just come down from the glory of the transfiguration mount  
and there was something about him that drew the crowds to him.

Immediately he demands to know what's going on.

It's the father of the boy that speaks up.  
“My son is possessed by a demon.  
It often throws him to the ground,  
he foams at the mouth,  
he gnashes his teeth  
he goes rigid.  
and he can't speak.  
I asked your disciples to help but they couldn't.” (Mark 9:17-18)

In exasperation,  
Jesus bemoans the state of unbelief that he finds among the crowd.  
The fact that he says “O unbelieving generation” suggests that he includes the whole group  
in his condemnation,  
though he appears to be speaking to the boy's father.

When the boy saw Jesus,  
the evil spirit immediately threw him into convulsions  
and the boy rolled around on the ground,  
foaming at the mouth.  
“He's been like this since childhood”  
the father responds to Jesus enquiry.  
“Often throws him into fire or water in an attempt to kill him.”  
“But if you can please take pity on us and help us.” (Mark 9:21-22)

“*If*”, says Jesus, “*If* you can”  
Anything is possible for him who believes. (Mark 9:23)

In desperation, the father replies “I do believe, help me to believe.” (Mark 9:24)

And Jesus responds by commanding the spirit to leave the boy and never come back  
and the boy is healed.

Later when the disciples ask why they had failed,

Jesus enigmatically replies that this kind only comes out by prayer.

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Perhaps the first thing to notice is that only Jesus could handle this situation.  
He immediately takes control.

Neither the crowd,  
nor the boy’s father,  
nor the Jewish teachers,  
nor the nine disciples had any answers.  
They were all powerless and even the disciples had failed.  
Only Jesus could cast this demon out.

It wasn’t as if the disciples didn’t have power over demons.  
Back in Chapter 6,  
Jesus had given them that specific power and they had used it.

In Mark chapter 6 we read:

<sup>7</sup>Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits  
<sup>12</sup>They went out and preached that people should repent.  
<sup>13</sup>They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Apparently the Jewish teachers also exercised this power.  
But it is only Jesus who could drive this one out.  
There is no question as to where the power lies.  
It lies with the One sent by God the Father.

So whatever we may say later about faith, belief or prayer,  
the one unassailable fact here is that the demon will only obey Jesus  
and it is only through him that the boy is healed.  
In the church this is the one lesson we all find hard to learn.  
How very quickly we take the credit for what we do.  
Whereas anything we do that has any real value in the Kingdom of God  
is done in his strength  
and not ours.

As Paul says to the Philippians  
“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)  
You might even say that anything done in our own strength  
has no spiritual value at all,  
but that would be limiting God,  
which we cannot do.

The next thing to notice is Jesus’ exasperation with them all.  
He castigates them for their unbelief.

It seems a very human reaction and it serves to remind us just how human Jesus was.  
At this distance in time,  
we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians can easily forget or ignore his humanity  
and envisage some God-like figure walking around Palestine.  
But this incident exposes his natural irritation

and annoyance at their unbelief.  
He longs for them to grasp who he is.

I'm reminded of the woman at the well in Sychar in John 4,  
where Jesus says to her,  
"If you had known who you were talking to,  
you would have asked him for living water". (John 4:10)  
"If you had known."  
There is a longing there to be recognised by his own creatures as to who he was.

I hate fancy dress parties.  
But I remember on one occasion I went to a fancy dress party dressed in a skeleton suit  
complete, of course, with the head,  
which I had hired from a local hire shop.  
And unsurprisingly no-one recognized me.  
But what a strange feeling it was!  
There I was wandering around seeing people who all knew me  
and I knew them,  
but they didn't see me.  
It was almost like being invisible.  
A strange feeling of isolation and loneliness.

John says, "He came to .... his own and his own received him not."  
"The world did not recognise him" (John 1:10-11)

I think this incident shows just how disappointed he was  
that they didn't recognise him for who he was.  
- the depth of sadness that he isn't received  
and that they didn't know who he was.  
- and his anger that they were so blind.

But why was he angry?  
Why was he so irritated with them?  
It's as though he's saying, "I don't want to do this?"  
I don't know how long I can keep this up?"  
These people,  
they just come and expect us to heal them.  
They're not interested in me,  
or who I really am,  
nor what I'm here to do.  
All they're interested in are the 'goodies'.

So who is he castigating for their unbelief?  
I think everyone,  
but especially the boy's father.

It seems as if Jesus wants to know:  
Has this man come to his disciples just to get his son healed?  
Or has he come looking for Jesus,  
because he is the Lord of Life

and has the power to heal his son  
and save them both from sin?

You see,

Jesus didn't come just to heal people.  
He didn't come just to feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fishes.  
He didn't come just to walk on water  
or calm the wind and the waves.  
He came to redeem mankind.  
He came to reveal his Father God to the world of men and women.  
He came to die on the cross in our place,  
for our sins  
and be raised again by the power of the Father.

The healings and the miracles were signs of who he was.  
They pointed to his identity.  
They were windows into heaven.

We often forget that Jesus spent much more time teaching  
than he did doing miracles.  
They were not his priority.

So here he is more concerned about the spiritual state of the boy's father  
than he was with the sickness of the boy.

This is why belief is so important in this incident.  
Jesus came to save souls  
and that is his primary work.

So when the man says “If you can,” Jesus is almost sarcastic.  
“If you can?”  
“Anything is possible for him who believes.”

“Believes what?” we may ask.  
“Believes Him,” has to be the answer.

For only he has the power to heal.  
Only he has the power to cast out demons.  
Only he has the power to forgive sins and redeem us.

In desperation, the boy's father cries out,  
“I do believe, please help me to believe” *(my paraphrase)*

This is what Jesus is looking for:  
A faith that recognises its own frailty,  
its own inadequacy,  
its own dependency on the Son of God.

So he heals the boy.

We all have to come to this place.  
The place of realization that of ourselves we are nothing.  
We can do nothing.  
Our only hope lies in Him.

And so it is when it comes to prayer.

Jesus seems to imply that as long as our belief is strong enough,  
anything is possible.  
Indeed, '*possible*' is the operative word.

When the disciples asked why they had failed,  
they are told that this kind of demon only goes out by prayer,  
suggesting either that they hadn't prayed,  
or they hadn't prayed enough.

But if we look at Matthew's account of the same incident,  
Jesus says that they had too little faith,  
yet faith as small as a grain of mustard seed is enough to move mountains. (Matthew 17:20-21)

So it is not the strength of the faith,  
but the power of the One on whom the faith depends.  
So the disciples' failure was a lack of dependence on Christ.  
Yet we must beware of jumping to conclusions.

Many have taught from these scriptures that providing our faith is strong enough,  
that we pray hard enough  
and believe deeply enough,  
our prayers will always be answered.

Yet our own experience  
and scripture itself teaches us that this is false teaching.

John tells us in his epistle that:  
we have (confidence) in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

(1 John 5:14)

So answers to our prayers are not only dependant on his power,  
but also on his will.

James tells us

<sup>3</sup>When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives,  
that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

(James 1:3)

But he also tells us that we don't have because we don't ask.

(James 1:2-3)

Yet we are encouraged throughout the Bible to pray.

Every worthy from Adam to Christ  
and on through the New Testament  
has communed with God through prayer.  
Jesus himself frequently took himself off to pray,

seeking direction and strength from his heavenly Father.  
The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray  
and he gave them a model prayer,  
which we know as the Lord's Prayer.  
And after Jesus had ascended to heaven the apostles dedicated themselves to prayer.

Prayer is the lifeline for the Christian.  
You can pray when you like.  
Some find time every morning.  
Others before they go to bed.  
Yet others talk to God whenever they feel the need  
or the desire to seek his will  
or tender their requests,  
But there is no magic formula for answered prayer.  
God answers according to his great power  
and his will  
and we remain dependant on him as our heavenly Father.

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So Jesus and his disciples move on from this incident in their lives.  
They had failed,  
but it was not the first time  
and it would not be the last.  
We ourselves will find the need to ask him,  
"why did we fail Lord"  
and he will enlighten you where you went wrong  
and I trust that your faith will be stronger  
as you acknowledge your dependency on Him.

Leaving that place,  
Jesus takes his humbled disciples on the next stage of their journey.  
They need to understand his mission or they will not stay the course.  
He tells them that the Son of Man will be betrayed into the hands of men.  
They will kill him,  
but after three days he will rise again.

Still they didn't understand,  
but after the incident of the epileptic boy,  
they were too afraid to ask,  
lest he castigate them again.

But they soon slip back to their old ways,  
as we shall see (next week) when Jesus deals with their debate  
as to who will be the greatest.

Such is the nature of our human hearts that though we fail,  
we often do not learn from our failures,  
and we soon slip back into our own ways.

Yet through the mercy of God and the love of Christ

we are saved from ourselves  
and have a destiny in heaven with Christ for evermore.

May we prove ourselves worthy of such grace  
and may our lives be enriched  
as we regularly seek his face in prayer,  
remembering that only he has the power to forgive  
and to save.

May we all find our true salvation in Him.

Amen

Paul Rydon – 9 August 2009