

## FACING FAILURE WELL

BY IAN PARKINSON, CPAS LEADERSHIP SPECIALIST

I can still vividly remember the experience of preaching my first sermon. It was to the (fairly traditional) village church where I had worshipped during my teenage years, and there was a good deal that I was sure God had been wanting to say to them for quite a long time!

I had spent many hours in preparation and the message was burning within me as I climbed the pulpit steps. Despite this, five minutes into the sermon, it didn't seem to be flowing quite as I had hoped. After ten minutes I wasn't sure that people were obviously connecting with what I was saying. Fifteen minutes in I lost my place in my notes and suddenly felt very exposed. After twenty minutes (the usual length of sermon here was twelve minutes) with people looking more than a little restless, I realised I was only half way through my material. When I finished a few minutes

later, having galloped through my remaining points, I genuinely wanted the ground to swallow me up. Unfortunately, this being a communion service, most of the service still lay ahead, including the agonising minutes shaking hands afterwards at the church door with people. Some of them at least tried to offer polite encouragement, even though we all knew that as sermons go this one had been pretty disastrous.

The sense of failure that morning and for quite some time afterwards was pretty crushing. Despite a strong sense of God's call to this ministry, it seemed abundantly clear to me that I would never make a preacher.

All of us will very likely have similar experiences of the bitter taste of failure. It's not just the pain of being dealt a blow to our ego (not always a bad thing!). The



real bitterness lies in the feeling that we have disappointed others, failed to reward the trust they have shown in us and, worst of all, that we have let God down. We feel we have failed to discharge the responsibility he has entrusted to us. So how on earth can we speak of failing well?

Although the world often prefers to skirt around failure, or to redefine it as 'negative success', failure is something we need to embrace as a vital element in our own growth and development. Truthfully, there ought to be a certain inevitability about failure. As Bobby Kennedy once observed, 'Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.'

### THREE TYPES OF FAILURE

I find it helpful to differentiate between three very different types of failure.

#### 1. Failing Backwards (Failure to Avoid)

Craig Hamilton<sup>1</sup> describes this as '...the kind of failure that occurs because of neglect, moral collapse, or sheer stupidity. The "backwards" isn't referring to the failure itself but to the backwards path that leads to this kind of failure.'

Failing backwards is the kind of failure that is the result of moral weakness or character flaws we have refused to address. It comes about when we put ourselves in situations where we are more likely to succumb to weakness or temptation, or when we fail to enter into helpful accountability relationships. It is the poor performance of responsibilities and ministry tasks which is not simply due to inexperience but rather to laziness, lack of preparation or failure to allocate time responsibly.



John is a church leader I had some involvement with a little while ago. Gifted and energetic, his new church took to him quickly. His confident exterior effectively masked the serious insecurities which had been part and parcel of his life since childhood and which he was terrified of confronting. Longing to be liked and affirmed, fearful of conflict, John drifted into the patterns of behaviour which had been themes of his adult life: always appearing to agree with others, never confronting, saying contradictory things at different times to different people, sometimes dishonestly covering his tracks. It took only a matter of months before people began to see through this, to identify his dishonesty and ultimately to lose confidence and trust. His church began to shrink.

This is the kind of failure we want to avoid at all costs. The wise leader will seek to develop strategies to keep the possibility of such failure at bay. This includes doing our best to replenish ourselves in every dimension of life, ongoing openness to growing in self-awareness and recognising that we are most vulnerable when our resources are depleted.

#### 2. Failing Forwards (Failure to Embrace)

This is the kind of failure that is not only to be expected but which is also necessary as a tool for growth. It's the kind of failure that happens when you are diligent, thoughtful, careful and accepting of guidance and counsel – and yet you still don't succeed.

My failure in preaching was not, largely, due to anything in me other than lack of experience and lack of expertise in constructing and delivering a sermon. Mercifully, someone sat down with me a few days later and helped me learn from my mistakes. What's more, that same person (my vicar) gave me other opportunities to preach in the following weeks, help with preparation and yet more constructive feedback. It took me a while to develop helpful preaching skills, but it was experiences of failing that spurred me on and which became the tools for learning and growing. Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, after numerous abortive attempts to perfect his product memorably quipped 'I have not failed; I have just found 10,000 ways that do not work.'

Failing forwards is perfectly normal and may well be the one thing which motivates us to apply ourselves to growth and development. One of the most striking features of the manner in which Jesus develops and grows his own closest followers is the way in which he so often puts them in situations where they are forced to take risks and even, at times, fail. This is not in order to push them down, but rather to encourage them to grow in faith, to seek more of God's resources or to gain an appetite for development in other ways.

Sadly, a misplaced fear of such failure is that which so often leads to us becoming risk-averse and thus keeps us from learning as we might. In a moving reflection on her own personal journey, the author J K Rowling suggests: 'You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something,

unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Failing Upwards (Failure God Encourages)

I refer to the direction of this failure as ‘upwards’ because this is the kind of failure which is designed to throw us upon God in a deeper and more profound way. This is rarely something that even the least risk-averse will willingly embrace because it relates not simply to failing in tasks or in our personal skills but rather to coming to the end of our own self-resourcefulness (what might have been described in older spiritual traditions as ‘brokenness’).

Such failure, in my experience, is inevitably something which God has to initiate, or at least enable, through the circumstances of our lives. It is the kind of failure referred to by the apostle Paul<sup>3</sup> when he describes the thorn in the flesh which God permits him to experience. Something beyond his own ability to endure, but which becomes the avenue to experiencing the grace and resources of God in a way which would have been otherwise denied him.

It is the kind of failure entered into by the apostle Peter when, having protested his loyalty to Jesus, he finds himself within hours, when under pressure, denying any knowledge of him. He weeps bitterly as he is confronted with the limitations of his own resources. It is this experience of brokenness which leads him to be able to receive the grace and equipping of God in a deeper and fuller way. He is then able to lead and serve out of the limitless resources of God rather than from his own flawed human capacity.

Life in Christ is a process of allowing God to break our reliance upon ourselves and our own resources. This will only come about when we experience what it is to come to the end of ourselves, and this usually only occurs when we experience failure and brokenness. Only then are we able to say with Paul, ‘Most gladly, therefore, I will boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.’



<sup>1</sup> Wisdom in Leadership, Craig Hamilton, Matthias Media (2015)

<sup>2</sup> J K Rowling, ‘The Fringe Benefits of Failure’, speech to Harvard University, 5 June 2008

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7-10



#### FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the particular triggers which might make you more prone to failing backwards?
2. How willing are you to take appropriate risks? What factors inhibit such willingness in you?
3. Can you identify ways in which your own self-reliance keeps you from experiencing as fully as you might the power and grace of God?