

BIBLE READING: Mark 6:1-13

## SERMON

It's strange isn't it that Australia has chosen to commemorate ANZAC Day. Where other countries celebrate great military victories and revolutions we gather to remember a military failure. A battle that saw many of a generation's youngest and finest men slaughtered in a war that was not their own. Somehow I think we have discovered something nations and civilisations much older than we have missed. We do not celebrate the glory of war but the sacrifices made by men and women for their nation - even though their political leaders may be incompetent.

Failure is a word that strikes fear in the heart of everybody today. Our society has become so success-oriented that we have very little tolerance for failure.

There was a program on TV that filmed several young people placed in a house together - entitled "The House from Hell". One of the girls made the remark, "I have never failed at anything I have ever tried to do." It was one of those sentences that makes you stop while you are crossing the room and ask, "What did she say?" Her honest confidence amazes me. I have struggled with failure my whole life - yet here is a person who blithely unthinkingly believes that they have never failed. My response is, "She'll learn soon enough."

If you live long and attempt much, you will run up against failure.

People fail every day. They suffer from failed relationships, failed marriages, failure at work and failure in health. Most of us can identify with failure, and we know from experience that failure is hard to cope with in a world like ours. When we fail at something, most of us think of it as the ultimate and irreversible tragedy of all time. We see it as the one aspect of life from which there is no reprieve and no reversal.

Jesus both experienced failure himself and expected his disciples to fail. In our text today, Jesus gives his disciples instructions about what to do when they are rejected.

Jesus has been moving from one success to another in his ministry.

As Mark leads up to this point, we have witnessed some of Jesus' most amazing miracles - the stilling of the storm, the healing of the demon-possessed man, and the restoration of Jairus' little daughter to life. Now, searching for some rest, Jesus journeys back to his own hometown of Nazareth.

At his home synagogue, Jesus begins to teach. And he earns a response, but hardly like that in other places. As in other places, the people are astonished at his teaching, but this time they are astonishingly appalled at his message and manner. "How dare this local boy, Jesus, assume such authority?" they ask.

And verse three says, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him."

This is actually the third time that Jesus had tasted a glimpse of failure in his ministry. In Mark 3:21, his own family labelled him crazy and tried to restrain him. In Mark 3:31, his mother and brothers and sisters try again to remove him from his ministry. Here in his home town, he meets with out and out rejection, prompting him to utter his famous line, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour."

Then Jesus turns to commission his disciples for the beginning of their missionary activity. He tells the disciples that it is time for them to begin their ministry, going two by two into the countryside preaching and casting out unclean spirits. He advises them to travel lightly, taking

nothing but a staff. They are to carry no bread, no bag, and no money in their belts. They are to wear sandals and not even take an extra tunic.

But in verse 11, Jesus prepares them for failure when he says, "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." Jesus makes it clear that they will not be insulated from failure just because they are going in his name.

In fact, Jesus knows that failure will be a real possibility, so he provides his disciples with a sacrament of failure - shaking the dust off their feet.

Jesus' inauguration of a "sacrament of failure" does not mean that he is sending the disciples out to fail. Rather, he is showing them how to carry on in the face of failure. Nobody likes to hear they are going to have to face failure in life. But understanding how Jesus provided all Christians with a sacrament of failure can empower all of us to carry on when we fail.

In his book *A Theology of Failure*, John Narrone says, "*A theology which takes failure seriously does not encourage fatalism, passivity, indifference to the world; rather it affirms that the [one] who cannot freely lay down [their] life is one whose ideals and values are already compromised.*" (John Narrone, *A Theology of Failure* [New York: Paulist Press, 1974], 11).

Jesus tells his disciples that they need not fear failure either. He says to shake off the dust and go on.

#### 1) Failure can lead to better things

Sometimes our highest hopes are destroyed so that we can be prepared for better things. The failure of the caterpillar is the birth of the butterfly. The death of the seed is the prelude to its resurrection as wheat. Someone has said that plants grow best in the darkness of night just before dawn. Our failures can be the door to a new success.

Shake off the dust and go on.

#### 2) Failure can be creative

Sometimes we get stuck in a rut and it takes failure to jolt us out of the routine so that we can be truly creative. An adventurous life requires risk-taking. Great courage is needed to face real change. A great failure can be the influence that enables us to risk and change.

Shake off the dust and go on.

#### 3) Failure can be failure for Christ

Sometimes failure comes our way when we are doing everything in our power to serve Christ. Some modern theologies promise health, wealth and success if we will only follow Christ. But he promised that his disciples would experience the same kind of rejection that he experienced.

Don't forget, 10 of Jesus' original disciples were brutally murdered - martyred for the sake of the gospel. Failure is good when the failure is for Christ's sake.

Shake off the dust and go on.

C.S. Lewis once said "*Failures, repeated failures, are finger posts on the road to achievement. One fails forward toward success.*"

Failure is not the end of the world. Failure is not a debilitating disease that ruins us for eternity. In fact, we need not be afraid to fail. We can expect to fail at times. Then exercise Jesus' ritual of failure - shake the dust and go on.

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