

Second Sunday of Lent 2023

Psalm 121, Matthew 10:1-15



Almighty God, you know the secrets of our hearts and you are the writer of our own story. Be with us in our meditations and reflections, that we may put our trust in you alone. Amen.

I wonder.

When you hear the names of the apostles like we just heard them in our Gospel story ... can you imagine your name on the list? Your names are indeed on that list, because you all are disciples of Christ! So picture yourself with Simon and Andrew, with the sons of Zebedee, with Thomas and Matthew and the many others, women and men, helping out and journeying with Jesus.



In First Century Palestine, discipleship was a normal part of the Jewish tradition. It was also a great privilege – to be called by a learned rabbi to become an apprentice and a travelling companion – it was an invitation to model life on that of the rabbi and become like him.

As you travel with Jesus, you are taught by him every day, and you observe all his healings and his miracles. You are an eyewitness to the feeding of vast crowds, to Gentiles coming in faith to receive healing for other people they care for, you witness individuals receiving forgiveness from God. You watch and listen to the opposition of religious authorities. And you're constantly warned by Jesus about the cost of following him.

So when the day finally comes and it is your turn to be sent out to do his work, how do you feel? Excited? Apprehensive?

You receive your mission order. Two by two, go out to proclaim that the kingdom has come near. With the authority given to you by Jesus, heal the sick, raise the dead, drive out demons, freely give. And do not take anything with you: no bag, no gold or silver, no extra shirt or sandals or staff. Hopefully, people of peace will welcome you in their homes. If they don't, leave their town, and shake the dust off your feet – which means treat them with utter contempt.

If I'm honest, the mission feels a bit like we're set up to fail. It feels like climbing a mountain with virtually no equipment. And we know from the get-go that there *will* be failure. There will be those who will not listen. And failure, in fact, will be even greater than that – we know how the story ends in the time of Jesus:



Matthew describes the loneliness of Gethsemane as Jesus prays in agony while his disciples fail to stay awake. Then at his hour of greatest need, one disciple betrays him, one denies him, and many flee away rather than face persecution from the authorities.

Every coin has two sides. And this one is called *Failure*, the name of the book which has inspired our Lent booklet this year, *Dust and Glory*. In the book, we read that 'failure is the wallpaper of life, so we'd better get used to it.' As humans, we fail at every level, sometimes at corporate level, with the tragic consequences of war, misery, and railway accidents. We are, as we read in our reflection for Friday 'imperfect saints (and perfect sinners)'. But Jesus himself prepares us for failure as well. He calls us to take up our cross and follow him, in the middle of the suffering, the mess, the unbelief, the cynicism of the world.

When Jesus sent out his apostles, he knew full well that their message would be rejected, because it did not match some people's expectations. Some wanted a different kind of kingdom, one that would support and validate their own national and personal ambitions.

This is a warning for us too: we all like to be liked, and want to be wanted, but not everyone, even the people we might imagine, will be pleased at the news that God is now running the world in a new way, the way Jesus was showing and teaching. We don't like to fail, and we're afraid of failure – and that can stop us from taking risks and trying new things, even when we know that God's kingdom is a new order of things.

And in order to enter the kingdom, in order to live for it and work for it, we need the other side of the coin. *Faith*.

With no bag, no gold, no silver, no extra tunic or sandals, we have a lot of room for faith. As we seek to follow Jesus and climb that symbolic mountain, we are reminded of the words of the psalmist: I lift up my eyes to the summits: where will my help come from? It comes from the Lord. The one who watches over us night and day.



And we are also reminded that the very people who failed to stay at Jesus' side in his darkest hour are also the ones who witnessed the supremacy and sovereignty of God in the resurrection of Jesus. And it was these followers who were empowered by the Holy Spirit, laid the foundation of the Church and went on to become martyrs for their *faith*.

So how do we respond when the road is hard, when we have a sense of failure, particularly in our Christian work? Do we feel surprised or angry? Or do we accept Jesus' invitation to walk the tough path he has trodden?

We can respond to difficulty and failure by focusing on the negative, on the symbol of shame and failure that was the crucifixion. Or, as Resurrection people, we can respond by looking to the empty cross, standing in the glorious light of Easter morning, in the new order of things, the new reality that is the kingdom of God.

As we start our second week in Lent, let us remember that appearances can be deceiving. What looks like failure and weakness might just be the strength that only comes from vulnerability. It is only when we open up our hearts and minds and surrender to the love and power of God that we realise that we can do nothing in our own strength alone.

In the mountains, sheep do not survive long unless they are tended by the shepherd. Jesus warned his disciples that they would face opposition, even persecution. They were likely to be a long way out of their comfort zone, confronting interrogation and arrest. Yet they were not to be afraid, because the Holy Spirit would teach them how to respond. Whatever they were going through, they would be under the care of the God who knows everything about them: even the number of hairs on their heads. Jesus meant that even if the cost of following him is great, *the cost of holding on to our own autonomy and will is even greater.*

And so I would like to leave you with this thought for the week to come: as crowds came to receive the words of Jesus and open their own lives to the love of God, we too can open our hearts to absorb the truth of the kingdom of heaven.

Let us pray...

**Lord, help us to see clearly
when things go wrong;
may we not be swift to blame
when others fail;
and may we not run away
when we ourselves fail,
but instead put all our trust in you.
Amen**

Further reading

I found the following books and booklet particularly useful, and I quote them in this sermon:

Elaine Storkey, *Meeting God in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 2022), pp. 3, and 42 to 45

Emma Ineson, *Failure* (London: SPCK, 2022), pp. 11-12

Emma Ineson, *Dust and Glory* (London: Church House Publishing, 2023), Week 1

Tom Wright, *Lent for Everyone, Matthew, Year A* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 34