

Sermon 14th April 2024,
08.30, BCP Holy Communion
All Saints' Cottenham
Acts 3:12-19 and Luke 24.36b-48
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Learning to live after our mistakes

The Bible readings today were likely written at about the same time and by the same writer. The Luke passage takes us back to very soon after the Resurrection, when the risen Christ had to convince a group of terrified disciples of his presence and make sure they remembered their own Scriptures. He had to remind them that everything written about him *'in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.'* They do take some convincing but eventually take heart and understand what they need to do next.

In the Acts passage, Peter and John have started to go out and about in Jerusalem, applying their new confidence. They have just come from curing a seriously disabled man at the Temple in Jerusalem. Peter and John have used the skills and knowledge they learned through following Jesus in life and boosted by their faith in Jesus as the risen Christ. We might imagine they were pretty amazed at themselves and people around them were certainly amazed at them.

One theme that connects both Bible readings is about people making mistakes, then turning to God who can offer forgiveness, then having the confidence to tell others about God. Today we face the same dilemma in our own lives. We are all imperfect and we keep making mistakes. But God always offers a way forward, we really can learn from our mistakes and we can live better lives.

On Tuesday night last week there was a big football match in North London. Arsenal played Bayern Munich, both incredibly skilled teams at the top of their game. The result was a draw, not what either team wanted. And guess what was one of the commentaries the morning after on Radio 4? *"Arsenal have got to learn from their mistakes"*. No doubt in the last few days there has been a lot of soul-searching in both teams' meetings with their managers. The players have to realise their mistakes, then have the confidence and trust in each other to play better next time.

Here's a rather different example about learning from mistakes. When a man or woman goes to prison in this country for committing a serious and dangerous crime, after some time they may get the chance to go before the Parole Board and hope to be released or move on to an open prison. Here is some of what the simple guide for prisoners says:

The main thing the Parole Board talk about is risk. Risk means if people might be harmed if you are released or moved to an open prison. They will want to know about problems with things like drugs or alcohol or controlling your temper and if you understand how your actions affected the victims of your crimes and what the judge said about you when you were sentenced.

They also want to know what good changes you have made to yourself in prison. They will want to know what help and support you would have if you were released from prison, where you would live and what you would do.

Admittedly sometimes Parole Boards get things wrong and some people turn out to be a continuing risk to others. But the Parole Board can also get it right. Women and men are given a chance to change. That's a good thing for them and their families. They get to see themselves and others in a different way and that helps all of society in some way.

Clearly the Parole Board members are not God. But in our church context today, through prayer, church services, sermons and reading the Bible, we can learn that God always gives us new chances to learn from mistakes and do things differently. Jesus, the risen Christ, helps us not just to experience his presence but to see ourselves differently. Just like the very first disciples in the 1st century, we can move on. In the words of Rowan Williams the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, poet and theologian, in Christ we can be "*restored and reshaped.*" Another present day theologian says something similar. Sam Wells says "*God works with who and what we are to change us, not replace us.*"

Now here's a note of caution about the Bible reading today from Acts. I'm always very uneasy about some of what Peter is recorded as saying. Those words have infamously been used by Christians and others to condemn all Jewish people for killing Jesus and have led to terrible anti-Semitism over time. It was only in 1965 that the Roman Catholic Pope eventually declared that this was totally wrong. Other main Christian traditions followed more recently.

I can't help thinking a big "*if only*" about that reading from Acts. If only the writer of Acts had recorded Peter as admitting to his own mistakes before blaming others and then telling them they acted "*in ignorance*" and they should "*repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.*" After all, Peter did make some big mistakes in his own life before, including denying he knew Jesus. When he did that the week before, he was certainly not acting in ignorance and he was certainly not perfect.

But the good news is that God did work with who and what Peter was, to change him, not replace him. He became a significant leader of the new Christian Church and the rest is history.

What does that mean today? Peter was a human being, after all, like us. From time to time we all, through fear, ignorance, uncertainty or just not thinking straight, make mistakes. We get things wrong, have to say sorry and seek forgiveness.

So let us be kind and realistic about each other whoever we are. Everyone here, whether a Christian for many years or completely new to what it all means, does make mistakes. We can all keep learning and we can all keep being "*restored and reshaped*" by God.

Finally, I'm reminded that the last time I preached here I used a quote from Desmond Tutu: "*We are all just God's lightbulbs and our job is to remain screwed in.*"

Well, here's another story about light bulbs but this time about learning from mistakes. The famous American inventor Thomas Edison had a fascinating life. His mother taught him to read, write and do maths and he did not go to school. In adult life he supported women getting the vote, was passionate about improving public utilities and was against war. He became very deaf and had peculiar views about diet, mainly drinking milk throughout the day. He also stated, *"I do not believe in the God of the theologians; but that there is a Supreme Intelligence I do not doubt."*

Whether or not he believed in God, it is beyond doubt that he made thousands of mistakes in experiments with electricity before finally making the working light bulbs that benefited so many people. He said he persisted so that in America *"only rich people would need to burn candles."* He was far from being a perfect human being but he did make an enormous difference to the modern world.

Possibly not many of us in Cottenham and Rampton will have committed serious and dangerous crimes like those women and men who come before the Parole Board. Neither are many of us world-class footballers who occasionally miss the goal. On the other hand, who knows what invention some people here might be working on that will change the world? Cottenham and Rampton are full of people of all ages with amazing talents!

The key message to take away from our readings today is that we are all imperfect and we all make mistakes in our everyday lives. The good news is that we are invited every day to be open to God who *"works with who and what we are to change us, not replace us"*.

Amen.