

NEW BEGINNINGS....PETER

Back in 1905, a young physics student submitted a doctoral thesis to the University of Berne in Switzerland. It was rejected as irrelevant and fanciful. That young student didn't let the failure be the last word. He reworked the thesis and gave his name to the theory it proposed. The student was Albert Einstein and his proposal was the Theory of Relativity. A few years before in 1894, an English Speech teacher at the prestigious Harrow School in London, wrote a scathing report on one of his students. "A conspicuous lack of success" summed up the record of that sixteen year old. He too didn't let it be the last word, and during the dark days of World War Two, the speeches of that now grown up student, Winston Churchill, inspired a nation.

Success and failure are not always clearly perceived. Sometimes we think we have failed but have really succeeded. Sometimes we think we have succeeded but really failed. Other times, we think we have failed and we are right. But even in such cases, it is not the end for us. Especially if we are in the hands of Jesus, who gets a gleam in his eye when he notices one of his children struggling with failure. Not because he endorses misconduct or because he doesn't care about our conduct. Rather because he knows that when we fail we may just be more open to his prompting and realise that success in life depends not on our heroics but on our helpless trust in him.

Let's look at one of the more notorious failures among Jesus' people and see how Jesus gave this man a new beginning. The man is Peter. And for all of us who make a mess of things and wonder if it can be put right again, his story is an encouragement that no failure is final and that new beginnings are the specialty of Jesus who calls us to follow him.

Back in *MARK 14:27-31*, Jesus has told his followers that he will be betrayed. Peter points the finger at others and loudly claims he won't let Jesus down. Jesus tells him that this so called "rock" will

not only do that, but do it three times. Jesus isn't fooled by Peter's bravado. But nor does he angrily turn on him. His understanding of human frailty gives him a gentleness lacking in those who idealise human beings only to be disappointed by them.

When Jesus faces his moment of trial in Gethsemane, Peter like the others can't stay awake and pray despite Jesus' requests. And because he is fatigued and doesn't pray, when the crisis comes, Peter acts unwisely. We pray regularly so that when the crisis comes we may meet it with wisdom and grace. Too often, we only rush to pray in the midst of crisis and we our prayers at such times can be not much more than expressions of panic. Better to pray consistently so when the trial comes, we meet it well.

Peter reacts with aggression by physically striking one of the temple guard who have come to arrest Jesus. He resorted to type, a blundering aggressor. And then when Jesus is taken away Peter is brave or curious enough to follow at a distance. When he is challenged repeatedly to declare his membership of Jesus' followers, he vehemently denies it. *LUKE 22:54-62* records this, and also notes that Jesus looks at Peter. Probably a look of sad understanding rather than bitter resentment.

Little wonder Peter wept. And he is close to us in his weeping. We too make promises we don't keep. We too betray others when it may be convenient to do so. We too blunder in to help and end up doing more harm than good. We too point the finger at the faults of others only to painfully confront our own failures. Jesus looks at us with similar sad understanding. Hurt, and yet not giving up on us.

After dying and rising again, Jesus appears to his disciples. One such appearance was at the lakeside one morning. Recorded in *JOHN 21*. At this time, Jesus calls Peter aside. Is this to be the exit interview? Go back to fishing, Peter. I have to have strong men on my team and you have proven yourself weak. I thought there was more to you than that, but I was wrong. You're off the team. Or perhaps something less radical. Perhaps a lecture on commitment and team play, a stern rebuke and a warning that repeated failures

like that won't be tolerated. Still on the team, but on rigorous probation.

Nothing of the sort happened. *JOHN 21:15-19*. Jesus rather issues Peter with an invitation to continue the journey. And he does it in an unexpected way. He asks Peter three times if he loves him. Having disengaged from Jesus wilfully three times, Peter is being asked to reconnect with him wilfully three times. Jesus doesn't urge Peter to greater obedience or commitment. He gets to the heart of the matter. If Jesus can only be assured of our love for him, he can get to work on all our cowardice, immaturity, unreliability, and folly. Love is the defining quality of our relationship with Jesus.

Not that love is some mere sentiment or fine words. Love expresses itself in action. Jesus isn't letting Peter off the hook here. He is not saying betrayal and disobedience don't matter. But he knows that if Peter at heart loves him, then he is in a position to get to work on such frailties. Within a relationship of mutual love, faults get worked on helpfully, and failings aren't the cause of despising. If I love Jesus, then he can work on my weaknesses. If I don't at heart love him, then I am putting myself beyond him.

When Peter let Jesus down so badly, it was not an expression of wickedness but of weakness. If we are wicked in stubbornly refusing to let God love us then not much can be done. But if we are weak in that we fail God despite our best intentions, then much can be done. God's love for us in Jesus creates the climate in which we can change for the better and not let our failures become the defining qualities of our life.

And it is not as if we have to summons up heroic efforts to love Jesus. We give Jesus the love we have, not the love we wish we had. And in doing so, he can make it more than what it is. Also in this context remember that the most important reality in life is not my love for God but his love for me.

It is possible that by using three differing words for love that Jesus is getting to the heart of Peter's genuine yet imperfect love. Could

read as "do you truly and deeply love me?" "Yes Lord I care about you." "Peter, do you truly and deeply love me?" "Yes Lord, I care about you." "Peter, do you even care about me?" "Yes Lord, I at the very least care about you." Whether this word distinction can be maintained or not, Jesus is drawing from Peter not an expression of heroic obedience, but a simple declaration of love. And it is enough.

On the basis of such a declaration of love, Jesus gives Peter new responsibility. He is to care for the people of God, for whom Jesus died. No greater responsibility could be envisaged. And it is being entrusted to a loud mouthed coward whose love for God is nothing to write home about. Why does Jesus do this? Because he has no choice. He can only choose fallible human beings to do his work.

We ought not to wonder at the failings of Christian leaders. We must not idealise them and assume they are beyond failure. We certainly must help them avoid terrible failure, but we must be realistic and understand that they, like the people they lead, are on a journey to wholeness and haven't arrived yet. The precious people of God are in the hands of precious leaders who love God and others genuinely but imperfectly.

Peter wasn't destined for the scrapheap. Nor are any of us. We will stumble and fall. Jesus doesn't keep on walking and rush on to be with the ones who seem to be making great strides and avoiding the silly mistakes we seem to make. He is not off looking for someone better to journey alongside. He not only stops to pick us up when we fall, but gives us a task to do and the empowerment of his Spirit to do it. To fail is not to bring an end to our journey, but to make a new beginning within it.