**Acts 15:22-41**

**The Church: Prepared to fail**

One of the things I like so much about the Bible is that, yes, it is the Word of God to us, but it is also such a human document too. As well as celebrating the glory of God and celebrating the successes of individual believers and churches, the Bible is also full of stories about failure and weakness as well

It’s such a beautifully human book: it doesn’t try to hide the frailty of believers and paint a rosy picture of the saints as always being strong and flawless. And that’s one of the reasons that the Bible is so useful to us, because each one of us can relate to the picture of flawed humanity that is painted for us.

The Bible gives us permission to fail because we believe in a God who can redeem all human failure and bring good out of the most dire situations.

And the Bible gives us as a church permission to fail because it is full of stories about churches that, in an attempt to follow God actually get it really wrong on occasions and yet God can redeem every situation for good.

Now, I think that this is a message we need to hear today because we have been spending the last few weeks thinking about the nature of the church: how we rely on God, how we need to pray, how we need to serve the local community, and how we need to proclaim the Gospel in words as well as action. And we are coming towards the end of this sermon series now: just next Sunday to go. And we have been thinking about this topic in the light of our Mission Action Plan, which is a really bold and courageous document outlining all we want to achieve in the next decade. And we’ve been thinking about this topic in the light of our new Mission Statement, which is “Building community together on the values of Jesus”. And we’ve been thinking about this topic in the light of our strapline, which is “Church at the heart of Enfield”.

And we want to do all these things: we want to develop our mission, we want to build community together and we want to be church at the heart of Enfield. But these are bold ambitions and the truth is, that as the next decade unfolds, we will fail in our mission as much as we succeed. We will get some things right and we will get some things wrong. We will launch some initiatives that will be really successful and we will launch other initiatives that don’t get any traction at all. Our future direction will really excite some people and our future direction will really upset some others. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if everything we did here was a raging success and that everyone loved everything we did? But, you know, that is just not possible…it would be, quite literally, a superhuman feat, to achieve that…

So, over the next few years, we will need to learn how to embrace failure just as much as we want to embrace success.

And not only is that a good psychological thing to do. It’s also a biblical and spiritual principle too. And that’s what we heard in our reading from Acts 15: a story of how the early Church got it wrong, it failed, and yet God was able to take their failure and produce something beautiful from it. Let’s recap the story:

The earliest apostles had been working really hard to build the church across a wide geographical area for a number of years. They had seen success in Jerusalem and Cyprus and in Galatia and Pamphylia and Lystra and Derbe and Iconium. They had been doing really well in the power of God, and the lives of thousands of people had been transformed.

But now, here they are in Antioch and a crisis has occurred. There was a big debate going on about the extent to which Gentile Christians should have to obey the Jewish Laws. The Jewish Laws were not a part of their personal heritage, so did they need to take them on in order to live out the Christian life? And the debate was sorted out – we can think about the answers another day - and everything seems fine again.

But then another crisis erupts. And that so often seems to be how the church is, doesn’t it? Just when we get one thing sorted, another problem comes along and we spend so much of our time and energy calming troubled waters and trying to sort out issues in the community of faith!.

But the problem now was that Paul and Barnabas decided to re-visit all the churches they had established to see how they were getting on. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along but Paul didn’t agree because John Mark had previously deserted them during a tough period a few years before. Paul wanted to take Silas instead, who had always been faithful. And there was an almighty bust-up between Paul and Barnabas and they both went off in different directions: Barnabas with John Mark and Paul with Silas.

It was so sad. Paul and Barnabas had always been such good friends and worked so well together. But because they couldn’t agree on a church issue, they parted company and both stormed off in different directions. So sad that both these people who only wanted what was best for the church ended up losing their friendship because they couldn’t resolve their personal problems.

This is a story of failure. John Mark had failed by deserting them previously. Paul had failed by refusing to give John Mark a second chance. Barnabas and Paul had failed by resolve their differences.

It’s a story of failure.

But each one of those failings are ones that we so easily fall into, aren’t they?

Like John Mark, sometimes we desert God and the church when times get tough. All of us are happy to be associated with a church when it is going well. Perhaps we are happy to serve in leadership positions when all seems to be heading in the right direction. But when the road gets a bit steep and rugged, we can be tempted to find an easier route; maybe to join another church that might suit us better or absolve ourselves of responsibility by stepping out of leadership. It’s easy to do that: after all, we have enough hassles and stresses in life without letting church become just another one of those in our week!

But the church, just like any human organization, is on a journey. And sometimes that is easy and sometimes it is hard and we need to have perseverance and patience and vision if we are to make the journey into God’s future.

Over the coming few years, here at St. Andrew’s, that will definitely be the case as we pursue our Mission Action Plan: sometimes it will be easy, sometimes it will be hard. But we need patience and perseverance and a sense of the bigger picture if we are to move into God’s future.

And like Paul, sometimes we fail by refusing to give people a second chance. You know, we are all human: and sometimes we make mistakes in life. We’ve all said and done things that we regret: it’s part of the human condition. But at the heart of the Gospel message is, that no matter how much we mess up, God always gives us a second chance - and a third, and a fourth, and an infinite number. Remember that time when the disciples asked Jesus, “How many times should we forgive? Seven times?” and Jesus replied, “No, seventy times seven…” which, in the Jewish context of the day, was an infinite number.

We must be slow to judge and quick to forgive: that is the example that Jesus gives us and that is what the cross of Christ is all about.

I wonder if there is anyone in your life who you need to give a second chance to? Maybe today is the day to make that a reality…

And sometimes we fail like Paul and Barnabas by being unwilling to resolve differences. Bearing grudges against people can be so exhausting; physically, emotionally and spiritually. How much better it is, how much healthier it is, to try and resolve differences rather than harbouring resentment in our hearts. Much more liberating, much more healing…

So the failures in this passage are failures that we all tend towards as human beings. We need to guard against them for our own health and also guard against them as a church for the health of our own faith community.

But having noted the failures, we are bound to ask the question whether or not there is any redemption in this story? Did John Mark and Paul and Barnabas just fail and that was the end of the story? Or is there redemption, even in their failure?

Well, this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ we are talking about, so of course there is redemption: that’s what the Gospel is all about, isn’t it?

First, let’s think about Barnabas, who failed in conflict resolution. Well, we don’t hear about him again in the Bible after this moment. But take a trip to Cyprus and see just how revered Barnabas is in the Orthodox Church. So after this dispute, God forgave him and used him mightily to build the church in Cyprus and beyond.

The failure of Barnabas was not the end of the story: God redeemed him – and God can redeem you too.

And what about Paul, who failed to give someone a second chance? Paul went on, as we know, to establish the church across the whole region, leading thousands of people to faith and writing most of what we now have as the New Testament.

The failure of Paul was not the end of the story: God redeemed him – and God can redeem you too.

And what about John Mark, the one who jumped ship when times got tough in the church? Well, his name crops up over and over again through the rest of the New Testament and it seems that we went on to become a strong and faithful disciple. But more than that – you will know him best as the author of the Gospel of Mark; the first Gospel to be written and the one that Matthew and Luke based their own Gospels on. Mark’s future influence was absolutely massive.

The failure of Mark was not the end of the story: God redeemed him – and God can redeem you too.

So, this is a story of failure: the disciples messed up, the church messed up, people got hurt, bad decisions were made, and relationships were damaged.

But it’s also a story of redemption too: because despite the mistakes that were made, God redeemed all three of these people and continued to use them to further the work of the Kingdom. None of them – Barnabas, Paul or Mark – were beyond the pale for God.

And the same is true for each one of us too. Whatever mistakes are in your past, whatever mistakes you make in the future, God can redeem you and bring good out of your life and bring you healing and use you powerfully to change the lives of other people. Whatever mistakes are in the past for this church here at St. Andrew’s, and whatever mistakes we make in the future as we seek to pursue our Mission Action Plan, God will redeem us and bring good so that we can have a transformative impact on our community.

So don’t fear failure – failure is part of the human condition and part of human society. Failure is not the end of the story – there is more good to come. All we need to do is stay open to God when we fail and stay open to the community of faith and allow God to heal us, restore us, and use us again.

That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.