

TCC Sunday 5th January 2014 – When failure is a runway to faith reloaded – Mark 9v14-32

Title: “When failure is a runway to faith reloaded”

Purpose: To get people to think about their own FAILURE and then to decide whether for them it is:

- A RUNWAY TO FAITH RELOADED
- or only A RUT TO FRUSTRATION REINFORCED

Introduction

The runway at Greenham

Tell me when you know what this is:

- it is 2.2 miles in length
- it is between Thatcham and Newbury
- it has seen lots of heavy usage
- it is as wide as a motorway
- it was once the longest in Europe

Yes – you have guessed it THE RUNWAY on Greenham Common.

Much in the news of late

And you will probably know that RUNWAYS have been much in the news of late due to the need for extra landing and take-off capacity somewhere in the country.

One idea is to simply take the existing North and South runways at Heathrow and simply double their length.

More length on a runway means, in very simple terms, more possibilities and an all-round greater facility.

Today

Today, as we stand in the doorway of a new year AND as we come to our 8th Church Anniversary – we come to that passage in Mark which immediately follows the Transfiguration, the one where Jesus heals a demon possessed boy – and the TITLE that I want to give to it this morning is:

FAILURE:

- A RUNWAY TO FAITH RELOADED
- or only A RUT TO FRUSTRATION REINFORCED

Read the passage

*** READ PASSAGE – Mark 9v14-32 *** OPENSONG

By way of some initial digging over the ground – I want to briefly carry out **2 SURVEYS**:

SURVEY #1 - First impressions

SURVEY #1 - is to consider **4 “first or opening impressions”** that you might experience having listened to the passage read – and I’m going to work from the negative and unhelpful thru to the most positive and helpful:

- **FIRST** you might look at all the bickering that seems to be going on – after all it is the very first thing that you read:

Verse 14 “When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.”

And you might say to yourself – this is TYPICAL and this is a good example of EVERYTHING THAT I REALLY HATE ABOUT THE CHURCH.

Back in 2005, I went to a lecture under the title of “Is there any hope for the church?”
And the speaker gave us some very broad brush figures for this country that said that about:

20% of people are CHURCHED (of this half do all the work and the other half do nothing very much)

40% are UNCHURCHED – they have never been in any habit or practice of darkening the doors of any type of church (except for the 3 traditional life events of HATCH, MATCH & DISPATCH – Christenings, Weddings & Funerals)

And the remaining 40% are DECHURCHED – by which he meant that they had at one time been in some regular attendance at a church BUT they had FALLEN OUT over something OR, more likely, with SOMEONE and are thus BOTH disengaged and probably disenchanting.

If people are going to fall out with someone – the most likely candidate will usually be the minister – simply because he is the one who is likely to state the truth about things or lay down a particular line over something – and sometimes people are simply unwilling to functionally in any submission to another authority.

And here it maybe the fact that Jesus doesn’t mince his words – that one against draws out a strongly negative first reaction:

Verse 19 “O unbelieving generation...how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?...”

Ok – that is first impression #1 and it’s *NOT* very positive

- Our **SECOND** impression, is a lot more neutral all-told and goes more along the lines of:

“Ah yes! I already know this story – it’s in all the gospels (except for John) – it’s that one with the boy – the epileptic...”

But we should always learn to be a bit suspicious of ourselves whenever we start to think like that. For a start, although we have this story 3 times – none of them are identical and every one of them contributes aspects that are unique.

I think very often we fail to go behind stories in order to enter into how people might have been feeling.

One helpful preacher coined the acronym ERA –E-R-A:

Step 1 - **ENGAGE** the mind

Step 2 – **REFLECT** the emotion

Step 3 – **APPLY** the truth

Maybe for us we have only gotten in the habit of doing step 1!

- Our **THIRD** impression now becomes somewhat more positive and perhaps reflects the fact that we are still **IMPRESSIONABLE** in a good way:

Verse 15 says “As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were **overwhelmed with wonder** and **ran to greet him.**”

This is a nice response – certainly a lot better than:

- merely seeing a **FLAWED CHURCH** or
- resting back in a **FLAKY APPRECIATION** of the passage

It makes us ask the question: Q. Lord am I still impressionable, even after sitting in churches for 10, 15, 20, 30, 40 years?

And if the answer is – “Not very much” – then we should immediately confess this and pray that God might make us to “live again” and not be hard to his word.

The **LAST** impression is one that may not appear as the most positive – **BUT** is certainly the most helpful.

This is the first impression of Jesus himself:

Verse 19 “O unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

So 4 different first impressions:

Q. Which one is closest to you – as we stand at the threshold of this passage this morning?

Well that was **SURVEY #1** on “**FIRST OR OPENING IMPRESSIONS**”

SURVEY #2 – FIRST OR OPENING CONDITIONS

Now I want to go on, very briefly, to considering what I’ll call “**FIRST OR OPENING CONDITIONS**”.

And again we have FOUR (and I’m not really going to elaborate much on these):

- The **FIRST** – is **the father** – he is one who Jesus exposes as evidently is lacking in his faith
- The **SECOND** – is **the crowd** – who as is often the case in the gospels are rather superficial in their interests and will always run to the scene whenever there is a whiff of something spectacular that is about to take place
- **NEXT** – we have **the teachers of the law** (we see these in **Verse 14**) – they are arguing with the disciples. From what we know of them, they probably weren’t being very helpful in the situation, probably not being very complimentary – perhaps even jeering at the disciples because of the patent lack of success.

I think Jesus opening words in this section (here in Mark) are quite instructive:

Verse 16 “What are you arguing with them about?”

Q. Who do you think the YOU refers to there? Well – those teachers of the Law who are giving the disciples a hard time.

That is very encouraging to know that Jesus is on his disciples side and is immediately there to give them some back up.

- **LASTLY** – **the disciples** themselves – they seem to be at the centre of a somewhat chaotic scene – they are definitely up to their necks in it all – in fact way out of their depth!!

The Luke version puts it most starkly: Luke 9 verse 40 “I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.”

So all in all we have:

- a very disappointing scene
- a whole bunch of failures at one level or another!!

Right – I’m done surveying the scene and I have just two points that I want us to go through:

- #1 – FAILURE – “Learning to handle it”
- #2 – FAITH – “Learning to harness It”

So then

#1 – FAILURE – “Learning to handle it”

Jesus, when he enters the scene of commotion at the foot of the mountain, finds his disciples in a lot of

confusion.

They can't cast out a demon and maybe some of them are just completely confused – maybe saying things like “I just don't understand – this has never happened before?”

And you can feel for them – remember right at the very outset of Jesus ministry:

Mark 3v13-15 “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach **and to have authority to drive out demons.**”

At the conclusion of one of the mission trips, when around 70 of them go out two-by-two we read:

Luke 10v17 “The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, **even the demons submit to us in your name.**”

What had gone wrong?

Q. So what exactly had gone wrong?

Q. Was it because Jesus wasn't present at the time?

Well, clearly it can't have been that, because Jesus hadn't been present with them when they were out and about on their various mission trips when they had previously had success in exorcising demons.

Q. So what was the problem then? Well the passage tells us there in verses 28&29:

Mark 9v28-29 “After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn't we drive it out?” He replied, “**This kind can come out only by prayer.**”

Q. So are the disciples now saying phew! what a relief, for a moment I thought it was us – how were we to know that we were dealing with a SUPER-DEMON that only responds to PRAYER! ?

Well, Mark only gives us half the story – we need to turn to Matthew to fill in the other half of the conversation:

Matthew 17v19-20 “Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn't we drive it out?” He replied, “Because you have so little faith...”

A mechanistic faith

I think I can really identify with where these disciples have found themselves:

- they seem to have become perhaps a little blasé about things – a bit overconfident. I can almost hear them saying to one another “I really can't understand it – it worked the last time?”
- it is kind of the sausage machine version of faith

So we ran a Christianity Explored course that had some real success – so all we have to do this time is just turn the handle, repeat the recipe, and lo and behold – “it's a total failure!!”

- in these situations prayer so easily gets side-lined – that vital link of dependency on God
- and faith get substituted – instead you now have faith in the NOTION – that what you did last time will happen again – rather than faith in GOD HIMSELF

AW Tozer quote

An often repeated quote from **AW Tozer** picks up the sentiment here rather well:

AW Tozer: “If the Holy Spirit left the church today, no-one would notice. We would just carry on as usual.”

EM Bounds quote

A similarly oft-quoted piece from **EM Bounds** bears repeating:

EM Bounds: “We are constantly straining to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations...this trend of the day (and he was writing in the 1800’s) has a tendency to lose sight of the man OR sink the man in the plan... The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men!”

So to put a label on the disciples failure – I would say that had sunk to the level of having a MECHANISTIC FAITH.

And we have to say that MACHINE-LIKE FAITH is always a BROKEN FAITH. It has lost its vital connection to God.

A Redeeming Fact - They want to learn

Now the disciples despite their complete failure do have a redeeming feature – they want to learn.

As far as they are concerned:

- THEIR FAILURE IS NOT GOING TO DEFINE THEM
- and THEIR FAILURE IS NOT GOING TO DETER THEM

Corrie Ten Boom was known to often quote this little poem in her writings:

*“Cowardly, wayward, and weak
I change with the changing sky.
Today so eager and strong
Tomorrow not caring to try.
But He never gives in,
And we two shall win,
Jesus and I.”*

There is no failure so deep that God cannot give us a helping hand to draw us up and out and beyond it.

We must just learn to give him our hand and allow him to help us.

Corrie was a little fearful in her earlier life and her father one time sensed her fear over someone who had died in the neighbourhood and so he said this to her:

When we travel when do I give you the ticket to get on the train? She responded just before we board. God gives us what we need when we need it. Here is one of her father's favourite sayings:

*If He takes us by the hand, He holds us fast.
If He holds us fast, He leads us on.
If He leads us on, one day He will bring us safely home.*

Ok – #1 then – **FAILURE** – “**Learning to handle it**”

#2 – FAITH – “Learning to harness it”

Mark’s account twice as long

As you know this account of the demon possessed boy is in 3 of the gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – and **one thing that is particularly noticeable** is the fact that in **Mark** (the shortest gospel by some way compared to Matthew and Luke) here **has the longest account of this event**.

So a fairly natural question would be:

Q. Why does Mark choose to use up precious space on this account?

(Matthew has just 7 verses, Luke 6 and a half and Mark here weighs in at 16 verses, over twice as long)

Well let me give you **2 superficial OR surface reasons**:

1. **The FIRST is that** Mark gives us **a lot of details about the boy**. It is as though we are given a **full set of medical case notes** – let me rehearse what we are given:
(and just for completeness I’ll add in what **Matthew** and **Luke** also contribute)
 - **FAMILY HISTORY** – he is an **ONLY SON**
 - **FIRST SIGNS & SYMPTOMS** – this is something chronic, it has been since childhood
 - **MAJOR EPISODES** – 2 acute examples listed – has fallen into the fire and also into water
 - **ASSOCIATED DISABILITIES** – cannot speak & unable to hear
 - **PRESENTATION OF ILLNESS**:
 - falls to the ground with no prior warning
 - rolls around
 - shrieks & screams
 - convulsions
 - grinding of the teeth
 - foaming at the mouth
 - goes rigid
 - **GENERAL COMPLEXION** – anaemic look, pallor – deathly
 - **FREQUENCY OF BOUTS** – almost constant, rarely free from it
 - **PATIENT CONDITION SUMMARY**:
 - extreme level of suffering
 - disease – advanced and destructive
 - **GP PROGNOSIS**:
 - imminent patient decease if no swift intervention

OK – so we have a lot of info about the boy – Q. But why?

Well you could say because the gospel writers and perhaps Mark in particular are good historians and they have done their investigative journalism well and they have gone around to those who were present and have just asked lots of questions.

More reasonable is that Jesus himself had time for the father and his son and wanted to know, or at the very least, wanted us to know (of course Jesus is still the omniscient, all knowing, Son of God).

The idiom – “God is in the details”

Perhaps you have come across **the English idiom**:

“**God is in the details**” which simply expresses the idea that:

‘Whatever one does should be done thoroughly’ i.e. Details are important
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And God is very keen on bringing to the surface the failure points in our lives.

He does this so that WE OURSELVES know the things that are BLOCKING UP and FORESHORTENING the RUNWAYS OF OUR LIVES.

2. **The SECOND reason** that Mark’s account is LONG relates to the fact that only here do we see Jesus engaging the man about his lack of faith.

I’ll read you the relevant section from Verse 22:

“But **if you can do anything**, take pity on us and help us. **‘If you can’?** said Jesus. **Everything is possible for him who believes.** Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, **I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!**”

And – in so many ways this is exactly what Jesus IS doing – helping him out of his unbelief.

As John says in the first chapter of his gospel in relation to Jesus – “he is the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of GRACE & TRUTH.”

Grace & Truth

You see Jesus is a dispenser of BOTH of these and NOT just one.

Yes – Jesus NAILS THE TRUTH:

he makes it plain all throughout that he is dealing with an UNBELIEVING GENERATION – that the disciples could not cast this demon out due to the smallness of their faith – and that the father should NOT be hesitating over Jesus capacity to heal his one and only son.

AND ALSO – Jesus DISHES OUT GRACE all the while:

just recognise that for Jesus this episode was no “5 second fly-by” Anne Robinson style

I want to take the few remaining moments to take a last long look at the scene gathering up the loose ends and bringing it to a conclusion:

CONCLUSION

We began thinking about RUNWAYS and about FAILURE (that is failure in our own lives).

And I simply asked you the question (that I have already asked myself):

- FAILURE:

Q. Is it ...
- A RUNWAY TO FAITH RELOADED
- or only A RUT TO FRUSTRATION REINFORCED?

Now unless you think this is all rather academic really – I was having a conversation with someone the other day and I said that if I was asked whether 2013 was a SUCCESS or a FAILURE (and I was only allowed to simply tick on box or the other – and I am talking Christian wise/Spiritually here) then I would have choose to tick the FAILURE box.

When you survey the different people around this scene in Mark 9, out of the 4 groups of people - *ALL* of them BAR NONE really should tick the FAILURE box:

- the crowd because most likely they were there primarily for the show
- the disciples because they failed to exercise faith and therefore failed to cast out the demon
- the teachers of the law because they were arguing and no doubt heaping scorn on the struggling disciples
- & lastly the father of the boy who casts doubt on Jesus' ability to be able to help

HOWEVER, when you break down these 4 groups, we can see that in all likelihood they break down the into two further groups

Half of them are able to accept their failure and use it as a RUNWAY TO FAITH RELOADED:

- these are the disciples – who ask Jesus afterward WHY DID IT NOT WORK – WHERE DID WE GO WRONG – they want to learn, to progress and they find the TRUTH and they receive Jesus GRACE-FILLED rebuke
- up with them is the father – who has some degree of FAITH and yet recognises and accepts Jesus rebuke that it is INSUFFICIENT and he seeks HELP

& the other half do not accept their failure and for them it is only a RUT TO FRUSTRATION REINFORCED:

- these are the teachers of the law – who feel that they are already know what's what and are not opening to seeing things afresh, anew – they will not BEND TO ANY TRUTH that might come their way
- these also the crowd – who similarly are operating at a surface and external level only – they do not, do not care to go down deeper