

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups August 23rd 2009
The Apprentice! Week 5 The Failure. John 12:1-11



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

This week we focus on Judas and look at another challenging area of Christian life, that of failure.

Lazarus has been raised from the dead after 4 days in the tomb and a dinner is being held in Jesus' honour. Lots of people are there because of Lazarus. As usual it's Martha who serves, who is busy and the perfect hostess, but Mary anoints Jesus with expensive perfume and wipes his feet with her hair. Fragrance fills the room. This wasn't just any old fragrance – it cost a fortune, a year's wages. And Judas Iscariot objects – give the money to feed the poor, he says. But Jesus says the perfume's for His burial. He is reminding them that there is a larger picture than they can see, one that Mary has glimpsed. Perhaps some of the religious authorities understood that Jesus might be the Messiah, but they couldn't face it because He was too unlike what they wanted, too much a revolutionary teacher, too critical of them and the status quo, and he would upset the peace they had negotiated with the Roman occupiers. He had to go, and the Chief priests made plans to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. Judas, of course, became key in that plan.

Judas was called, as we are, to be an Apprentice, but the task was not and is not easy. He wasn't the first one to fail, and wouldn't be the last. E.g. **Moses** – as a spoilt young man, an Israelite but brought up by an Egyptian princess, he killed another Egyptian and had to flee. Even though he recognised God's powerful presence at the burning bush, he doubted God and what God could do through him. (Exodus 3 and 4) But despite his failures, wonderful miracles were achieved by God, as he led the people out of Egypt.

King David; he was the youngest in his family yet was anointed king. He killed Goliath and after some troubled times with Saul he had everything going for him. But he wanted more: he saw Bathsheba and had an affair with her, knowing she was married. When she became pregnant, he arranged for her husband to be killed. (2 Samuel 11 & 12). Nathan the prophet pointed out to David his sin, David repented, and God used him to build up the people of Israel and write many of the psalms. Ps 51, from which we get much of our service and confession liturgy, was written as a direct response to what had happened.

New Testament: **Annianias and Sapphira** (Acts 5). Many other wealthy believers were giving all they owned to hold in common and help the poorer people. But Annianias pretended that he was giving all the money having sold a piece of property, while he in fact kept some back. Peter discerned this and accused him of lying to the Holy Spirit. Annianias, and later his wife, fell down and died. So the Bible is full of Apprentices who found the task too hard and who made wrong decisions and failed. And yet, those who saw the error of their ways, said sorry to God, were given another chance and God was able to use them to fulfil His plans and bless others.

We don't have to be perfect. If we want others to encounter something of God when they see us, if we sometimes are weak and vulnerable, that is more likely to help others see Jesus: our God, who chose to become a vulnerable human being and who allowed himself to be crucified. St Paul, writing about his own thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians (12:9-10), sums up God's perspective "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*". If we are weak, then the power of God can shine through. But sometimes we know we have failed. In the Confession used at Holy Communion we ask for God's forgiveness for sins committed *through negligence, through weakness, and through our own deliberate fault*. And we exhibit all three of these: we know we sometimes deliberately sin, but maybe negligence and weakness are things we prefer to overlook. But we can be negligent or weak when we misunderstand who we are meant to be and what we are meant to be doing, just as we heard last week with *who is the greatest?* We can get things wrong, often by judging by the *world's* standards not by God's. Sometimes we fail because our picture of God is too small and we refuse to see the bigger picture. Look at Mary anointing Jesus: her generosity and ability to worship him was because she had grasped *who* he truly was. Sometimes we get things wrong because we limit God's agenda, what we think should be done, as with those who thought the perfume money should have been spent on feeding the poor.

There's an episode of The Apprentice where James and Yasmina are live on TV trying to sell things. They go wrong because Yasmina doesn't listen to the producer, who trying to give her instructions through her ear piece, and James hasn't read the price correctly. We can get so involved with what we are doing, thinking it's the right thing, that we fail to spend time actually listening to what God is saying to us. We can also go wrong if we fail to test our ideas against Scripture.

With Judas there's not just failure, there's deliberate sin. But he is in our reading because he was originally called by Jesus just as were the other 11. He had a choice and he made the wrong choice. The consequences led to Jesus' death and to his own death. But despite everything Jesus loved him right up to the end. At the Last Supper He washed Judas' feet along with all the other disciples. And immediately after Jesus identified Judas as his betrayer, He shared the bread and wine with *all* his disciples, Judas included, as a sign of the forgiveness of sins. Judas was being offered forgiveness by Jesus even at that late hour.

Simon Peter, the one who often misunderstood and even made Jesus angry, wanted so much to be a good disciple yet on the night Jesus was arrested, Peter abandoned his master. But in the final event recorded in the gospels, Jesus reinstated Peter by the shore of Lake Galilee (John 21: 15-17). We read in St Paul's letter to the Romans (7:24-25) that Jesus' Spirit living in us will help us resist sin and become more and more like the people God created us to be. And yet we will all fail at times, as did even the great saints Peter and Paul, because sanctification is an on-going process and we are living in a fallen world. None of us will be perfect this side of the grave. But we always have a choice and there's always another chance with God because He loves us so much.

Witness: choose from these questions to discuss

1. Tell other members of your group about a time when you made a mess of something (e.g. because you failed to follow the instructions?)
2. Look at Romans 7:21-25 and discuss how this is relevant for yourselves.
3. In 2 Corinth 12:9-10 St Paul talk about his weakness, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*". What do you think is the difference between weakness and failure? How can we tell? When have you experienced a weakness that God has been able to use to reveal His power?
4. Look at Exodus 3:11-13 and 4:1-17 and Acts 5. When have you made excuses to God to try to avoid doing what He wanted?
5. Ps 51: read it together and have a time of repentance as God's Holy Spirit leads you.