

[2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Mark 6:1-6]

I was once talking with a 9-year old boy, one of the children in a large family that I knew. His dad was rather authoritarian, and would often deal harshly with the children, particularly the boys. He would rebuke and punish them when they failed to live up to the high standards he expected. I remember telling this young lad: ‘Mistakes don’t matter. They are an opportunity to learn’. He was amazed and delighted, and wanted me to tell him more.



Most parents and teachers today have learned that it is much more effective to encourage a child than to rebuke or punish her. This is great progress. Of course it works with adults too. In our first reading Paul reminds his Corinthian readers that he suffered from some recurring weakness - it was probably a physical one, like migraines, or malaria. Paul does not minimise it or pretend that he is tough enough to handle it. No, he has found the wisdom to recognise that such physical difficulties, like all our sufferings and even our worst failures are advantages, for they force us to let God’s power work through us. ‘My power is at its best in weakness. When I am weak, then I am strong.’

Perhaps the hardest failure is being rejected by our own, as Jesus was rejected by his home village. At first the villagers admired him, hearing the stories of how he had healed people in other places. Just before this, in Mark’s gospel, Jesus had calmed a violent storm; healed a woman’s incurable haemorrhage, and brought back to life a little girl who had just died. But although the villagers were impressed by Jesus’ wise and competent teaching they turned against him. Why? Luke’s gospel says it was because of his sermon: Jesus told them that they were not the only people God was choosing: that God loves and calls *all* peoples.

But Mark’s gospel simply tells us that the villagers were jealous of Jesus, asking what was so special about him. They knew his parents and family: he was just a common tradie! When we scoff at people we can end up denying their good qualities. By their disparaging words, those villagers turned Jesus into a failure: they rejected him. Their lack of faith dis-empowered Jesus, for his power is love, which depends on being accepted by someone who believes you. He could only heal a few people in the village who *did* welcome him with faith.

Like all prophets, Jesus spoke about God in new ways. “God’s reign is near; among you”. God’s kingdom is for *all* people. We can no longer divide and separate people into ‘us’ and ‘them’:

"insiders" and "outsiders". Our *real* failure is to separate people into categories and reject some because of their race, colour, sexuality, or social class, for the deepest *truth* about us is that we are all one human family.

This week is NAIDOC week. The initials mean *National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee*. It is now more than 100 years since First Nations people have been pointing out that Australia Day, for them, is no reason for celebrating. For more than a century they have been organising and protesting against the ways in which we European newcomers have treated them. Many of us are just now beginning to hear their tragic history, the countless stories, and admit the terrible mistakes we have made: massacres, massive theft of land; stealing eight generations of their children; putting them in prison at greater rates than other people; so many deaths in jail. While the Catholic church has greatly *helped* Indigenous people in many ways, we have also done much harm to these First Nations peoples.

We must not be *afraid* to hear these truths expressed; we must not be like the villagers who could not accept Jesus' new vision of where God is found; of whom God loves. As with every other failure, when we admit the ways we have failed the Aboriginal peoples in the past we find an *opportunity* to re-examine what we have done.

The hidden benefits of failing does not mean that things will later be turned around, and the underdog will come out on top, or the tables will be turned. No, weakness and failure are essentially the way to find the different kind of power of the Holy One within us all. This is why the poor are 'blessed', even *when* they are hungry; and those who mourn are 'happy' even *in* their grieving.

The most powerful force is not the rifle, nor unjust Government laws, nor prison bars or 'childrens' homes', but love and forgiveness. In the Aboriginal translation of the *Our Father* that we use today you will find that it states: 'we are sorry for those who have hurt us'. I find that amazing.

We will build a stronger, more just Australian society not by continuing to suppress *any* group of 'others', or continuing to deny them justice, but by growing to understand and love them. We need to discover that *all* 'others' belong in the same family as we do; that all of us, together, are human and children of God. Even our worst failures are forgiven and dealt with, because we are always accompanied and guided by infinite Love.

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