

Trinity 6 7th July 2024

Ezekiel 2.1-5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12.2-10

Mark 6.1-13

Some of you may have listened to the recent speech given by Roger Federer at a graduation ceremony, when he said that in his career he has won almost 80 percent of his singles matches, which is perhaps unsurprising. What is more startling is that he only won 54% of points in those matches – in other words, even the top-ranked players in the world win barely more than half of the points they play. Federer went on to say

"When you lose every second point on average, you learn not to dwell on every shot. You teach yourself to think, 'It's only a point.' "

In the game of life, Federer explained, you will lose "points," over and over. But this mindset helps you overcome self-doubt and negative energy. It frees you to fully commit to what comes next with intensity, clarity, and focus.

As Christians we might also add to that a sense of shifting our ideas of success and failure to align with the Kingdom values of love and peace and the flourishing of all creation. But how do we deal with those feelings of failure – of judgment – of how we are being seen by others? It seems to me that all of our readings today have something to say about this.

We hear three stories which all contain a sense of failure – Ezekial sent to a place he knows will ignore and reject him, Paul plagued by a constant and unnamed long term issue he describes as his 'thorn in the flesh' and Jesus, rejected by the very place that nurtured and formed him – his home town.

Paul tells us in our letter from Corinthians that he prayed repeatedly for his 'thorn in the flesh' to be taken away. We do not know what this thorn in the flesh was – there are many theories, whether it was a physical ailment, a situation he couldn't manage a person or group of people he was struggling with, but he clearly had some long term difficulty that he longed to be free of, and repeatedly asked for relief from.

Paul continued to pray for it to be taken from him – but also knew that there was something in his experience which had shaped him and continued to be a part of his life, that this was not a commentary on the power of prayer but more a sense of his learning to live with this as a reality in his life.

Today's Gospel reading holds this most powerfully, and I imagine that there were mixed feelings as Jesus returned to the place that formed him, as he stood in the synagogue of his childhood, perhaps amongst those who had taught him how to unroll the scrolls, heard him recite the scriptures for the first time as a boy, perhaps they can point to the door frame of their house and say I remember him coming with his dad to put up this lintel, good work that is and here he is preaching in the synagogue. Did Jesus expect them to be proud? Local boy made good? Or did he know there would be some who would just not be able to hear his radical message of God's love, who would find fault with the crowds that followed him everywhere, that human desire to bring him down a peg or two – we knew him before he was famous they grumble to each other.

But there is something rather strange in our story of Jesus back with the home crowd – so strange it seems almost comical, And that is the sentence, that he *could do no deeds of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them*. To me this feels like a bit of a narrator's joke – yeah, couldn't do anything, just cured a few people, did a couple of miracles, you know nothing much really – as a commentary on expectations – the early chapters of Mark were full of stories of healing stories which seemed to bring a fresh perspective, a freedom and a sense of flourishing – here instead it becomes 'curing a few sick people', in a kind of downbeat, uneventful action of no consequence.

To me there is an element of this in our reading from Ezekial as well. Ezekial is sent on a mission which was always going to fail – He is told in advance that no one is going to take any notice, that he isn't going to change people's minds or have some measurable dramatic impact – instead, after he has left, then *they shall know that there has been a prophet among them*. I think that is quite a modest, but encouraging objective really, especially in our contemporary world of measurable results, we are constantly being asked what impact we are making? What are our success criteria, to me this is something we can say; well people know there have been men and women of God among them. Our success is to be authentic to who we are called to be, to be a people of welcome, to hold a prayerful space that brings care for others, to live out God's message of inclusive all embracing love – as Gods Spirit guides and draws us.

When we see the world through God's eyes, can we see the beauty, the magnificence in the smallest thing –and perhaps we along with the community of Nazareth can ask ourselves, what is our attitude to those small, everyday moments – we do not have to travel to a mountain top – as lovely as that is – to experience the extraordinary beauty and wonder of creation. We do not have to meet Mother Teresa – as amazing as that would have been – to appreciate the gentle everyday kindness of a smile and a cup of tea. Not all prayers are answered with a blazing flash of light and a crowd of people – many more are answered by a gentle shaft of sunlight and a quiet conversation.

Again, I wonder if this speaks into how we react to what we perceive as success and failure in our lives? Can we hold this sense of God's peaceful presence in our lives? Do we celebrate or discount the familiar, the heaven in the ordinary? Can we hold on to

the surety from Paul that God's grace is sufficient, or the modest encouragement from Ezekial, that people will know that a man or woman of God has been amongst them?

Can we, as William Blake so memorably put it:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

I wonder what was going through Jesus' mind as he travelled back to visit Nazareth after moving to Capernaum? Perhaps you can relate to that sense of going back somewhere you grew up, or spent time in at a different part of your life? Meeting people you knew in your childhood, and discovering that you fall right back into that old relationship as if you had only seen each other last week – or of course conversely discovering that you have nothing to say to one another any more. Maybe you can slot right back in, or maybe feel like a complete fish out of water – that you have moved on and everything else has stayed the same. It can be a particularly disorienting experience.

Perhaps we have watched it in others, seeing people return and realising they are not the person they once were – or perhaps they have become more fully themselves, grown into the person they were always meant to be – and it asks something of us to accept this new version of the person they are becoming.