

### Lent 3: Luke 13:1-9, Isaiah 55:1-9

There is freedom in knowing that failure isn't final.

They say that captaining your country in sport is one of the greatest honours you can have, and I can somewhat relate to such great an honour, because one of my responsibilities is being *vice-captain* of the Archbishop of Canterbury cricket XI. Don't worry, there'll be time for photographs and signatures on the way out...

Now, you'd be forgiven for thinking there's a relatively small pool of cricketing talent to draw from within the CofE. But once upon a time, when I was a young ordinand, they actually held a series of trial matches to select the team from across the country.

At one of these matches I had been asked to open the batting. The opposing team began with two very strong bowlers, but I was so fearful of making a mistake that I played very defensively. More and more overs went by until 10 overs had passed and I had barely made any runs. It was starting to get a bit awkward... I was there to show I could bat, and was achieving the opposite. Eventually I was given out lbw, for a ball that seemed to hit my pad directly before the wicket. I had actually hit the ball with my bat first, but the umpire had missed it and given me out. But to be honest, it didn't matter, as I had so badly underperformed and was devastated as I trudged off the pitch.

But to my surprise, as I was walking off, the fielding team called me back as the wicket keeper and slips said that they had seen me hit the ball first and so rescinded their appeal. More cynically, they were perhaps thinking that if I stayed in for the whole innings our team would barely score any runs!

So having been on the precipice of complete failure, and to have then been reprieved, I felt a new sense of freedom. From that point onwards I decided just to go for it, and not worry about what the outcome! A couple of balls later I hit the same bowler, back over his head for a huge six, and thankfully I went on to make a decent score after that.

It was having faced the possibility of what I considered to be total failure, that I felt much more free to relax and play without anxiety.

Of course, this story is a bit too neat and tidy. I have plenty more stories of sporting failures. And in sport, just as with our lives, we do not always grab

these second chances as we might. This is why we need God's continual, ongoing grace.

The grace of the gardener who encourages the owner to endure with a fig tree that has been barren for three years, wanting to give it further opportunity to flourish and bear fruit. So too, God's grace bears with our failures and mistakes, as the fertile soil that sets us free to bear the fruit of his love.

God's grace is a setting free in the world, that we do not need to fear or be defined by our failures or mistakes.

But we only grasp this freedom by facing our failure *AS failure*. We must honestly face those parts of our lives where we have turned in on ourselves, where we have become closed-off from God's nourishing love.

As a postgraduate studying theology, I was fortunate to be supervised by former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. After a weekend with some friends who had been speaking of the importance of "fearing God," I remember asking Rowan about this as something I didn't really understand. I didn't see the message of the Gospel being about living in fear of God, and so was worrying I was being irreverent or missing something...

He replied by saying that fear of God is really just the realisation of where we would be *without God*. And that this realisation can be grasped only once we have already experienced the love of God who quenches the deep thirst and hunger of our souls. We only know what it is to be hungry or thirsty, because we know what it is to have been fed or quenched. Think of those who encounter Jesus in the Bible: it is only in meeting Christ, facing his goodness and mercy, that they are confronted with their own failure to live in this light.

In this sense, the fear of God cannot be separated from knowing the *grace* of God, because we only encounter the depth of our sinfulness as we simultaneously encounter of the depth of God's grace. Realising we are sinners, is always accompanied by the realisation that are *saved, loved, redeemed*, sinners. The two are always held together.

This is what is revealed at the cross. At the cross, in Christ crucified, we see where we would be without God. Alone, abandoned, forsaken, without hope. Yet, it is also at the cross that we see that God's grace has already plumbed the depths of our brokenness. In Jesus' commitment to go through the cross, we see there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Our God who richly pardons, who bears the cost of love, so that the hungry and thirsty may eat and drink freely.

To receive this water and food, however, we must first allow ourselves to be shown how badly we need it. Only in facing our failures as failure do we truly taste the freedom of God's grace.

This was especially brought home to me during a prison chaplaincy visit in Pentonville. I remember being in a chapel full of 3-4 hundred inmates, with only a handful of guards. I was asked to help with the prayer ministry and warned that as people came forward to keep the prayers short. I remember thinking, "yeh right, as if anyone is coming forward to receive prayer..." But when it came to it, every person in the chapel came forward, and to my surprise almost all of them asked for me to pray with them for forgiveness!

I was deeply moved by this and their utter sense of freedom, their ability to freely announce their need for forgiveness. Their clear acknowledgement that they depended on God's grace. In prison there was nowhere for them to hide or pretend they had it all-together.

How much easier is it for us not behind bars to hide behind the veneer and pretence of "having it altogether"? But do we know true freedom they seemed to experience? Or we imprisoned by our inability to declare our need for grace?

This is what we are called to in Lent, as we turn towards the cross. To turn and face Christ. Like the fig tree, we cannot bear good fruit purely through our own energy and intention, for these are gifts from God. But we can only open ourselves up to these gifts, to bearing the fruits of God's spirit, if we allow ourselves to be rooted in the nourishing soil of his love.

We face our failures, or repent, to use that loaded term, because we trust that in turning to Christ, in picking up our cross, our failures are not final. That only through this movement do we discover a new, risen life. The freedom of knowing that our failures are not final, because God's love is.

Amen.