

During this Lent I have been reading a book recommended by the Archbishop of Canterbury called *Failure*. It is written by Bishop Emma Ineson and although written in an easy and sometimes chatty style, she has covered what it means to be human in a profound and often moving way.

I've just started the last chapter which is to coincide with the fifth and final week of Lent. The chapter heading is 'How to fail really well'. Not, you might have thought, what we should really be doing, but that's only if we think that we should be aiming for perfection. But we must be careful: perfectionism leads to totally unrealistic goals, makes us intolerant of others, and can sap all our energies when we fail to live up to some impossible standard.

When I was at school, the room in the chaplaincy where the chaplain held his weekly discussion group, had a poster on the wall with a large sloth lolloping on a branch, with the words, 'My get up and go, has just got up and gone'! This is a very ordinary experience of failure, it is called 'acedia' (Greek: akidia) and was described by the early Christian monks as a mix of listlessness, anxiety and despair. They called it the 'the noonday demon'.

I have to admit that before I read Emma Ineson's book, I don't think I really appreciated what the poster of the sloth was really about. I thought it just meant being lazy or tired, but acedia, is not about being lazy, in fact sometimes being really busy is a way of avoiding acedia by shutting it out or displacing it. No, acedia is a kind of spiritual exhaustion and inertia caused when the messiness of the world is just too much for us.

Many people experienced acedia during the height of the covid pandemic when even doing ordinary things became too much for them and once the novelty of having more time to oneself had worn off and even zoom meetings at first seemed exciting, listlessness, anxiety and despair took over.

Today is Passion Sunday and marks the beginning of Passiontide when we focus on Jesus' sufferings, his last week and death. In human terms Passiontide embraces failure; it teaches us not to avoid failure but to embrace it and learn and grow from it - in other words, 'how to fail really well'.

Both of today's readings are about acedia failure.

In the first the prophet Ezekiel describes his vision of seeing the people as a valley of utterly dry bones. His vision is a parable of what the people, exiled in Babylon a thousand miles from Jerusalem, were experiencing emotionally and spiritually. Their exile experience was very much like lock-down during the pandemic, alienated from their ordinary everyday life they had lost their sense of belonging and their hope and trust in God. They had not learnt or embraced failure but allowed acedia to destroy them. God asks Ezekiel the existential question the people must have been asking themselves: 'can these bones live?' (Ezekiel 37: 3), can we ever be fully alive?

Just over a hundred years ago the poet T.S. Eliot used Ezekiel's imagery to describe a spiritless post-war society in his poem *The Wasteland*. In the poem many listless, bored, disconnected voices speak. One voice says:

Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many,

Sighs short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (*The Wasteland* lines 60-64)

I have been haunted by Eliot's image of listless crowds streaming over London Bridge ever since I read the poem as a teenager. Has the humdrum of daily life really sapped the spirit out of society? And now I wonder, has the pandemic and post-pandemic society also heightened our awareness of acedia, just as the First World War did for Eliot?

So, God's question to Ezekiel is a telling test: 'can these bones live?' Ezekiel responds, 'O Lord God, *you know*'. Ezekiel passes the test because he knows that it is only God who gives us spirit, we don't have to be perfect to receive it; in fact, it is quite the reverse - all we have to do is allow the Spirit to speak to us in all our failure.

Jesus says, in the Book of Revelation, 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking: if you hear my voice, open the door, and I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20).

The death of Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus also symbolises failure. In the story Jesus delays coming to see his critically ill friend, and so understandably first Martha says and later Mary also says, 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died' (John 11: 21 and 32). It is a test. Jesus delays because he is testing them on what resurrection means. On one level it means new life, at another it means renewed life. It is renewal of their spiritual life which Mary and Martha learn through their initial failure to trust in Jesus. Jesus cried out in a loud voice 'Lazarus come out' because this was his knock at their door.

Lazarus responds, Mary and Martha respond, many of the bystanders respond. The dry bones in Ezekiel's visionary parable respond. We must also respond.

So, let us make it our Passiontide promise not to avoid 'the noonday demon' of spiritual indifference, but to fail really well by allowing ourselves to respond to the knock of Christ in our hearts and to allow him to renew and restore us, in the resurrection life.

Michael Wilcockson