

FAILURE: A NEW TESTAMENT REFLECTION

By BRENDAN BYRNE

MARK'S ACCOUNT of Jesus's visit to his home town Nazareth (6,1-6) contains a striking admission of failure. We are told that 'he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and cured them' and that 'he marvelled because of their unbelief' (v 5). Matthew does not repeat this frank admission of powerlessness, offering instead a somewhat softened version: 'And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief' (13,58). But the Marcan account preserves a precious testimony that failure, incapacity formed some part of Jesus's experience.

In the context of a long tradition of stress upon the divinity of Jesus such explicit admissions of failure in the gospel record come as something of a shock. But the experience of failure is written far more pervasively into the New Testament record than perhaps we are inclined to believe. It is hard to imagine any more cataclysmic failure in the terms of the ancient world than that of ending one's life upon a cross. And it is naive to view the resurrection as a happy ending that somehow put it all right. The failure of which the New Testament speaks is far more complex than this, far more subtly woven into the pattern of Jesus's human life and mission.

Here I should like to take up this theme from the perspective of three New Testament writers. Mark, the earliest of the four gospels, seems a good place to begin. I shall fill out the Marcan picture with the very different one offered by Luke and conclude with some reflections culled from the distinctive vision of Paul.

The Gospel of Mark

Mark does not hesitate to present Jesus in his ministry as powerful in word and deed. Again and again we are reminded of the deep impression made by the authority of his teaching and the force of his healing power. The demons in particular take the

brunt of his attack. Jesus is that 'stronger man' who has come to dispossess Satan and the forces of darkness from their hold upon the 'house' of the world (3,27). The exorcisms, the miracles of healing and the teaching all represent an overthrow of the dehumanizing grip of Satan. As Jesus both proclaims and enacts the 'rule' or 'kingdom of God', he powerfully reclaims the world for God and for true humanity.

But, as Mark 6,5 quoted above suggests, a check to Jesus's power comes in the area of human response. At an early stage conflict with the religious leaders settles in (2,6-8). Jesus's own family fail to appreciate his new role, in fact, think him insane (3,20-22). Above all, and increasingly as the gospel continues, the disciples lack understanding and faith. This is explicitly made clear on two occasions in the boat, both following the miracles of multiplication (6,51-52; 8,14-21). A climax comes with the scene at Caesarea Philippi (8,27-33). In the person of Peter, they do acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. But when Jesus goes on to speak of the destiny to suffering and death that lies ahead, they remonstrate with him and seek to block his path (8,33).

From this moment on, Jesus's whole activity as he moves towards Jerusalem becomes an instruction of the disciples on precisely this point. But again and again we are reminded of their fear and lack of understanding: 'they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him' (9,30-32); and, as Jesus walks ahead on the way to Jerusalem, 'they were amazed and those who followed were afraid' (10,32).¹

All this misunderstanding and fear culminate in the total failure of the disciples at the time of the passion. Despite their earlier protestations (14,31), when Jesus is arrested in the garden, they all forsake him and flee (v 50). At the crucifixion a stranger, Simon of Cyrene, carries Jesus's cross (15,21). Not one of the male disciples is present, though the women are there, looking on from afar—the names of three of them carefully recorded (15,40-41). Jesus hangs upon his cross, his impotence to save himself mocked by the passers-by and the chief priests and scribes. Mark portrays Jesus dying not only bereft of human comfort but also voicing in his last utterance a terrifying sense of abandonment by God (v 34). In Mark the death of Jesus stands unrelieved in its fearful sense of abandonment and desolation.

All three of the passion predictions (8,31;9,31;10,34) had concluded with the announcement that Jesus would rise again. Yet the

gospel of Mark, in its authentic form,² leaves us with no vision of the risen Jesus. The women who come to the tomb on the first day of the week find the stone rolled away and a young man in a white robe sitting within the tomb (16,1-6). He announces the Easter message and also instructs them to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before them to Galilee, where they will see him (v 7). Amazingly, however, the women do not carry out this mandate, joyful though it might appear—they simply leave and flee, 'for trembling and astonishment had come upon them' (v 8). And so this extraordinary gospel comes to an abrupt end with a concluding record of failure: 'and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid'. Fear, not joy, has the last word.

It is not that Mark disbelieves in the resurrection. But he chooses to tell the Easter message in a hidden and oblique way. He lets stand unrelievedly in the foreground the sense of failure and desolation—apparent failure on Jesus's part, total failure in the case of the disciples. What is his purpose in so accentuating the sense of failure and fear?

Undoubtedly Mark is addressing a particular situation in his community. Perhaps persecution has already broken out and leadership has failed. Perhaps all this is still a threat. Whatever the case may have been, it is clear that Mark sees the need to press for a renewed reckoning with the role of suffering and failure in the following of Jesus. So he presents Jesus as the one who 'goes before' his followers, goes before them into failure and death, his fate dismaying and terrifying them as their world falls apart. The glimmer of hope comes from the message that, as he had 'gone before' them to Jerusalem, so, raised from the dead, he has 'gone before' them to Galilee. By 'following' him there, as instructed, they will see him again.

Mark, then, wrote a gospel preoccupied with failure. But the fact that the gospel continued to be preached in the evangelist's day showed that failure on the human side does not have the final word. The power of God worked and works through the human failure. We are immeasurably in Mark's debt that he confronted so unflinchingly the fact of failure, that by keeping at bay any sense of a 'happy ending', he let the failure and the fear stand in stark relief. Failure, both institutional and individual, is not necessarily something foreign to Christian experience. Nor is it something beyond the power of God to remedy. The 'good news' is that Jesus has been raised out of all this failure, that he lives

and has gone before us to Galilee. Mark insists that only those who 'follow' him with his cross (8,34), will find him there in his risen life.

The Gospel of Luke

Failure, too, lies at the centre of Luke's gospel. In this case it is not the failure of the disciples—a theme less prominent in Luke. It is a failure on a much larger scale: the failure of the bulk of God's people, Israel, to accept the salvation preached by Jesus as Messiah. Luke presents Jesus as the last in a long line of prophets rejected in Jerusalem (13,33-34)—a rejection which culminates in the leading role played by the Jewish authorities in pressuring Pilate to have him put to death (22,2; 23,2-5.18-25). A central theme of the gospel is that this failure is gathered into the wider purpose of God to have salvation made available to 'the ends of the earth'. The 'failure' of Israel requires sensitive handling since a simplistic view can strike up anti-semitic overtones. But Luke, as we shall see, is more inclined to stress the tragic rather than the culpable aspect of the development and to the end of Acts the gate is never closed on the salvation of Israel.³

In the infancy story of the gospel (Luke 1-2) we enter a world of wonder and joy. Key figures, representative of the *anawim* who wait upon the Lord's promise, recognize and celebrate in the birth of Jesus the dawn of the promised salvation. But, towards the end, the twin oracles of Simeon strike a conflicting note. The child he takes into his arms will be not only 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel' (2,32), but also 'a sign to be rejected . . . so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare' (vv 34-35).

This early hint of conflict prefigures the scene in the synagogue at Nazareth where Luke sets the start of Jesus's public ministry (4,16-30). Jesus reads out the prophecy from Isai 61,1: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .' and solemnly announces that 'today' in his presence among them this scripture is fulfilled (v 21). For a time all seems to go well. The townsfolk marvel at the gracious words which proceed from his mouth. But Jesus moves to disclose their 'secret thoughts'. These are not so gracious. When he hints that his mission, like that of the prophets Elijah and Elisha before him, must be one that reaches out beyond the confines of his native country, the scene turns ugly. The Nazarenes, we are told, 'rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of

the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went away' (vv 29-30).

As has been widely recognized in recent years, this episode functions as a prophetic paradigm of the whole pattern of Jesus's career in Luke. Jesus's own townsmen of Nazareth stand in for the Jews, to whom the announcement of salvation is first addressed. When, in word and action, Jesus makes clear the wider outreach of the gospel, his people reject him and seek to do away with him on the 'hill outside their city' (i.e. Jerusalem). His 'passing' through their midst and escape foreshadow the 'departure' (mentioned in the Transfiguration episode, 9,31) both of his death and of the movement of the gospel to the wider Gentile world. The incident at Nazareth contains the Lucan gospel story in miniature.⁴

The central focus of this 'rejection' motif in Luke rests upon the city of Jerusalem. The gospel sets the second part of Jesus's public ministry within the framework of a great 'journey' to Jerusalem (9,51-19,44), which from the start functions as the city of destiny for Jesus. Luke arranges the sequence of the temptations (4,1-13) so that the third and climactic one occurs in Jerusalem (vv 9-12). A leap from the Temple pinnacle would afford a breathtaking demonstration of messianic 'specialness'. Trading in this way upon his special powers as Son of God, Jesus could swiftly win glory and recognition in terms of conventional messianic expectation. But this temptation, like the former two, is rejected. Divine sonship for Jesus means accepting fully the human condition and all its limitations. He chooses to tread the ordinary human path 'to Jerusalem'—a path of obedience, suffering and death. In this way—and no other—will he 'enter' his (messianic) glory.⁵

As Jesus approaches the city, his thoughts turn increasingly to its fate. He admonishes it (13,33-35), weeps over it, alluding ironically to the popular etymology of its name as 'city of peace': 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace', (19,42; cf 21,24). Jerusalem has failed to know the time of its (messianic) visitation, and in due course (70 C.E.) would pay a terrible price for that failure. On his way to crucifixion Jesus expresses a similar warning to the 'daughters of Jerusalem' (23,27-32). He dies, mocked by the chief priests and rulers of the people, by the soldiers and one of the thieves. The conventional messianic dream has been shattered.

Nothing expresses this more poignantly than the lament of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, three days after Jesus's death. Pressed by the mysterious stranger who has joined them on their journey, they recount—without faith—what had happened in Jerusalem and their dashed hopes concerning Jesus of Nazareth: 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (24,19-21).

Jesus lets the disciples tell their story, speak out the full range of their disillusionment and despair. Then, we are told, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself'. From the scriptures, he shows that it was 'necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory' (vv 26-27)—'necessary' because it was the plan of God. Later, in the inn, they know him, momentarily, at the breaking of the bread (vv 30-31). Word and sacrament have come together to attest both the presence of Jesus and the meaning of his suffering and death. Faith is fanned into life through the scriptural testimony to the place of suffering in the divine scheme of salvation.

The Emmaus episode provides for Luke a paradigm of Christian life. Jesus accompanies despondent, disillusioned humanity on its journey of life. In his name and with his power the Church expounds the scriptures to show how God's plan works precisely through, not despite, suffering and failure. Faith is rekindled and the presence of the Lord celebrated in the Eucharist. In word and sacrament the Church discloses to later generations the living power of the Crucified.

In this way there is set up a pattern of 'conversion out of failure' also central to Luke. Jesus foretells Peter's denial, but prays also that when he has 'turned again' he might 'strengthen his brethren' (22,31-32). After the crucifixion, the crowds, at least, return home 'beating their breasts' (23,48). In the speeches of Acts, Jesus's death is portrayed as indeed a tragic mistake but one which nonetheless was part of the wider plan of God (Acts 3,17-18). Though responsibility for the death of Jesus is not set aside, the possibility of conversion and of obtaining salvation in Jesus's name continues to be held out, even to the very end (Acts 2,23-41; 3,13-26; 4,9-12; 5,30-32; 10,36-43; 13,38-39; 28,17-28).

For Luke Jesus is the Messiah who truly 'walks' with us on our human journey. Overcoming the craving for self-exaltation, which Satan so exploits, Jesus opens the way to salvation for all by

entering into the 'failure' in human terms of his role and mission.⁶ This is why another failure, the good thief who hangs with him in abject humiliation upon the cross (23,39-43), is the one who can correctly discern in his fellow sufferer the offer of true salvation. He becomes in this way the paradigm of all recipients of grace—particularly those who have learned through the emptiness of suffering something of the richness that comes from God.

Paul

Paul's letter to the Romans provides the mature and sustained account of his gospel. Its central idea is that of the 'righteousness' or 'saving justice' of God, a concept best understood from its Old Testament background rather than through modern ideas of 'justice'.⁷

'Righteousness' in its biblical sense has to do with faithful action within the terms of a relationship. In his 'righteousness' (Hebrew *sedeq/s^cdaqah*) Yahweh creates and nourishes the life of his covenant people, giving growth and fertility through the cycle of the seasons, victory and rescue in time of war. In many of the Psalms (e.g. Pss 67; 97; 98; 111; 145; 147) and especially in Isaiah 40-66 praise of Yahweh's saving righteousness is a pervasive theme. Over against this divine righteousness, a corresponding fidelity is required on the human side. Prosperity and good social order depend upon the extent to which Israelites, especially key figures such as the king, judges, etc., reflect and embody the righteousness flowing from God.

Very frequently in the scriptures acknowledgment of God's righteousness is accompanied by the confession of failure, of total *unrighteousness* on the human side (Isai 5,5-15; Ps 51,41; 65,1-5; 143; Lam 1,18; Dan 9,13-19; Neh 9;33; 2 Chr 12,16). There is admission that God is in the right and that Israel is in the wrong and that the evils that have come are owing to that lack of faithfulness. In such a case appeal is made to God, precisely in his righteousness, to purify, cleanse from sin and restore the life-giving relationship. A classic instance of this is Psalm 143. The psalmist confesses lack of righteousness, averring that no one is righteous in God's sight. The psalm both begins (v 1) and ends (v 11) with a cry for rescue to the righteousness of God. Though keenly conscious of infidelity to God, the human author is sure that God—in his righteousness—will remain faithful and bring rescue.

It is this pattern—faithful God: unfaithful Israel—that forms the matrix of Paul's presentation in Romans. In fact, at a key turning point in the letter, 3,20-21, it is clear that Psalm 143 is guiding his thought. For Paul what God is doing in Christ is to reach out in his saving faithfulness to a world that has not been faithful to him. In the crucified one the Creator graciously offers restoration of relationship and a new life to sinful human beings, not merely to Israel but to the entire Gentile world as well. The sole human response required to accept this offer of grace is the attitude of faith.

Faith for Paul implies precisely the admission of failure in any attempt to achieve right standing before God through one's own efforts. As such it stands over against an attitude that Paul terms 'boasting'. To 'boast' is to protest before God one's right to religious status on the basis of achievement—an attitude aptly illustrated in Luke's parable of the pharisee and the tax collector (18,9-14). The pharisee recounts his virtuous life and thanks God that he is not like the rest of men and particularly the tax collector nearby. The latter, conscious of his many failings, simply asks for mercy. It is he who goes home 'right' with God—in Pauline terms 'justified'.

Paul's vision of God's faithfulness deployed on a cosmic scale in Romans has its origin in his own experience of conversion. A celebrated passage of Philippians first catalogues the claims and achievements upon which his former existence had rested: 'a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, . . . as to righteousness under the law blameless' (3,5-6). But, 'whatever gain' he had, he was prepared to count as loss, to consider all previous achievement as 'refuse', for the sake of 'gaining' Christ Jesus and having a right standing solely 'in' him (vv 7-10). Conversion for Paul meant a freedom to write off as failure, as loss, all that he had held most precious in the past. 'In Christ' he had discovered a richness that allowed him to confront and accept creatively the wrong direction of his former life. Dignity and worth flowed from the new relationship created by God rather than from his own efforts to demonstrate zeal.

In his life as a Christian apostle Paul still had to confront much failure. His own writings hardly bear out the rather optimistic picture of his apostolate given in Acts. He writes Galatians in deepest frustration, desperately trying to save the law-free gospel for the Gentiles. The Corinthian community clearly included a

number of fairly sophisticated, possibly wealthy members, who, once converted, soon learned to look down upon the founding father, making unfavourable comparisons with other teachers more to their liking.

In the face of this attitude, we find Paul evolving an apostolic spirituality based entirely upon conformity to the Crucified. This emerges in Paul's defence of preaching the cross at the start of 1 Corinthians (1,18-2,6). Perhaps the most celebrated formulation occurs in the second letter:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies' (2 Cor 4,7-10).

Later (12,9-10) Paul will aver, 'I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong'.

This is not a rationalization of inferiority. Paul was no wimp. From one who was a fighter from beginning to end, we have here a profound theological insight into the way the gospel of the Crucified sets the pattern of Christian life and apostleship. Weakness, difficulty, failure are not necessarily signs that one is on the wrong track. Certainly they should not be courted for their own sake—and it is clear that Paul carefully planned his work and approach to make the most of the opportunities that presented. But such experiences nonetheless allow God's grace to have full scope, allow him to show his true nature as the 'One who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not' (Rom 4,17b). This is the God in whom Abraham, model of Christian faith, believed—a God who 'justifies the ungodly' (v.5), who draws failure, even culpable failure, into his creative designs for humanity and the world.

Conclusion

I have taken three New Testament writers—Mark, Luke and Paul—and attempted to show that failure plays a central role in the Christian conception of each. Three New Testament theologians, but each witnessing to the one faith centred upon the Crucified,

Jesus of Nazareth. A faith that has as its central emblem the image of a man crucified between two thieves cannot but have a central preoccupation with failure.

Christian art down the ages has done much to relieve the starkness of the cross. Symbols of priestly dignity and royal glory have been added. The cross appears on crowns and banners as emblem of worldly power. Every now and again, however, there is a call to confront the stark blend of human failure and divine power that Calvary shows. A literary example that never ceases to move me comes in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Helena*. The old empress, mother of Constantine, has finally succeeded in her quest to find the true cross. These are the book's closing lines:

But the wood has endured. In splinters and shavings, gorgeously encased, it has travelled the world over and found a joyous welcome among every race.

For it states a fact.

Hounds are checked, hunting wild. A horn calls clear through the covert. Helena casts them back on the scent. Above all the babble of her age and ours, she makes one blunt assertion. And there alone lies Hope.⁸

NOTES

¹ For a fuller statement of this theme in Mark see F. J. Moloney, *The living voice of the Gospel* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1986), pp 30-42.

² That is, understanding that the original gospel as we now have it ended at 16,8. The 'longer ending' 16,9-20 is wanting in major early manuscripts and is generally held to be a something added to give the gospel a resurrection story more conformable to the other accounts.

³ See R. C. Tannehill, *The narrative unity of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p 261.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 60-73.

⁵ Cf E. La Verdière, *Luke* (NT message 5; Wilmington: Glazier: 1980), pp 56-57.

⁶ Cf J. Kodell, 'Luke's theology of the death of Jesus' in D. Durken, (ed.) *Sin, salvation and the Spirit* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1979), pp 221-30, esp. pp 226-27, following R. Glöckner.

⁷ See B. J. Byrne, *Reckoning with Romans* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1986), pp 42-48.

⁸ E. Waugh, *Helena* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p 159.