

## Things to Consider

- ▶ We are not the first to have failed and we will not be the last. Failing is part of what it means to be human. Even the thief hanging beside Jesus asked at the last moment that He, Jesus, might remember him when He came into His kingdom. And Jesus promised him a place. (Luke 23.43) Talk about a deathbed conversion!
- ▶ Think of the cunning and guile of the patriarch Jacob. He made many mistakes in life and finally found himself having to come to terms with this in an all-night wrestling match with God, or His angel. Left with a wound, it meant he limped for the rest of his life – a constant reminder of his past (Genesis 32). Moses was a murderer (Exodus 2.12) and so was David (2 Samuel 11.15). Think too of Peter. None would forget their sin and yet they were forgiven transformed, and deeply loved by God.
- ▶ The Mulla, Nasrudin decided to grow a flower garden, but found it filled, not only with chosen flowers, but with dandelions as well. He sought advice from gardeners everywhere, but to no avail. Then he visited the king's gardener who offered various possible solutions but Nasrudin had tried them all. Finally he said to Nasrudin, 'Well then I suggest you learn to love them'. Might the golden thread to us be to learn to love ourselves as God has made us, with all our failings, shortcomings and imperfections; to seek God's forgiveness and mercy when needed, and accept God's love of us. None of this negates that deep desire within us to learn, grow and change where possible.
- ▶ A Jewish story tells of Isaac son of Yekel, a poor man living in Kraków, Poland. Each night he dreamt the same vivid dream of going to distant Prague and finding treasure buried under a certain bridge. Eventually he decided to journey to see if it were true. The bridge was guarded by soldiers each time he went and eventually an officer stopped him and asked what he was doing. Realising he had no choice, he told of his repeated dream. The officer laughed and said he too had had a dream every night for the past two weeks about a Jew named Isaac son of Yekel from Kraków who had treasure buried beneath the stove of his home. Would it not be ridiculous to go in search! Isaac rushed home, dug beneath his stove, and found the treasure! The moral? Our treasure lies deep within us, not elsewhere.
- ▶ So questions for each of us to ponder are: where have we failed in life with which we still have not psychologically and spiritually dealt? How might we take the next step regarding this? What might the golden thread be in it for us? What might God be saying to us? Do we need to talk to someone about it? You will find the answers deep within you as Isaac found his treasure buried at home. It was there all the time.

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## Attending to God

'The hidden gift in failure ...'



**Obviously, none of us like failure**, and yet all of us have failed many times through the years, beginning with our first attempt at crawling. There are things that we have done or not done which were wrong, or we failed at in the doing, things said or not said, our inability to have achieved all we hoped or might have done in life ... The list could go on and on. Without too much thinking, no doubt you could remember some things that in hindsight would bring colour to your cheeks.

**So the questions become** – what can we do about this? How might we live with this, our past, in a way that is life-giving?

**With the past** there is not much that we can do except when we need to ask forgiveness of others and this we should do. As we know, sometimes our failures can have serious consequences for both ourselves and others.

**We probably need to forgive ourselves** for our failures and stop 'beating ourselves up'. It is never easy but we need to try and let them go and move on in life as it is important that we do not let sin and failure define who we are. We can end up making ourselves a victim, in this case, of self. Choosing victimhood will mean we never rise above this burden we have placed upon our shoulders, never accept responsibility for our actions, and can cease growing as a human being. For some this may give the illusion of comfort and psychological safety, but in the end we stop growing. A danger for us is that we may choose to allow our failures in life to make us bitter and cynical in order to hide our hurt. Seek help if you need to.

**Another way of looking at this** is to realise that life will let us make all the mistakes we need to make so that we might learn the lessons we need to grow towards our full humanity and maturity in Christ. Our life is a series of little deaths that will help prepare us for the 'big' death – the one which is physical.

**We might also see that each of our failures** can become, if we so choose, an opportunity to draw nearer to God, for we have learned something about ourselves. Not that we have been deliberately dishonest but we slowly become a little more honest with ourselves through our growing self-awareness. This, if you like, is the golden thread in our failure.

**Just as there is a blindspot** in our night vision, so too there are blind spots in our life of which others may be aware and we are not. Thus our failures can be grace-filled moments, lifting the fog, enabling us to see a little more clearly what was there all the time, but which we could not see (Psalm 19.12). A painful gift, true, but nonetheless still a gift.

**Our failures can assist** by making us face our false pride for where we have not succeeded or have not become the success we thought we

might have been. This in turn can lead to the beginnings of a humility or alternatively, a deepening of it. We recognise we are of the earth. With this can come a new compassion for both self and others as we realise they too struggle and at times, fail like us. Nelson Mandela said that the worst thing we can do to any human is to humiliate them. This growing compassion for our fellow humans will assist in lessening that possibility.

**Most importantly**, our failures can help us remember a truth about God. We don't have to earn God's love by our success. We don't have to earn God's approval. We just have to accept His unconditional love for us whether we succeed or fail: an extraordinary truth! This means that our failures do not need to define us. We are much more than them.

**Put another way, if married** you did not earn the love your partner has for you and if you did, a time would come when they realised you were not all they thought or hoped you would be. Then, their love for you was conditional. In the same way you cannot earn God's love and do not need to. His love is unconditional.

**Similarly you neither start nor cease** loving your child according to whether they succeed or fail, achieve or not. You know them in some ways better than they know themselves. You know their abilities and their failings and you still accept and love them unconditionally for who they are – your beloved child. God also loves us without strings attached. We do not need to check the fine print.

**John Welch writes in *The Carmelite Way***: 'Our lives are a story, ultimately, not of our failures or triumphs, but of God's mercies. That is the true story of our lives. When we learn to tell it right, then we are entering more fully into the truth of our existence'.

**We cannot see all this** in our moment of failure, any more than Jesus could see the outcome of His crucifixion, which gave the appearance, and a sense of failure (Matthew 27.46). However, it was pointing to a bigger story, that of resurrection. Like Jesus we just have to trust in the darkness. That takes courage and persistence.

**On the front page** is a photo of the *helix nebula* given the name *The Eye of God*. This can remind us that we are always in God's presence and sight. That should be a source of encouragement rather than something unnerving. Belden Lane in *Backpacking with the Saints* tells the story of a disciple coming to his master and saying he has done terrible things in life. His master tells him we are all connected by a rope to God and when we sin that rope is cut. When we repent, it is retied. With the years and the cutting and tying of knots, the rope is shortened and the distance between us and God narrows. God is always forgiving when we repent and He loves to tie knots! As Lane says, this is not the celebration of failure, but the gift of the freedom to make mistakes.