

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (B) & Holy Baptism: CCSY, 5 July 2009

2 Sam 5:1-5, 9-10; 2 Cor 12:2-10; 6:1-13

*Shaking the dust from our feet: A forgotten sacrament?*<sup>1</sup>

David: Israel's first great king, whose story, as we've followed it thus far over recent Sunday mornings is one of seemingly irresistible success. As a young boy David pleases his predecessor Saul by his music, and wins admiration on the battlefield by defeating Goliath. After a string of military victories and narrow escapes, he then rises to the throne by a bloodless coup. The people adore him; God is with him; he establishes his capital in Jerusalem and is promised an eternal dynasty. But, as we shall see in weeks to come, this is tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. David's descent from these dizzy heights is no less spectacular. And yet this fallen hero becomes the father of Solomonic wisdom, and the forbear of Messiah.

Paul: oppressor of a religious minority turned zealot for that same cause; incredibly gifted and deeply insecure; driven, opinionated, embroiled in controversy, yet as prolific and creative a theologian, and as vigorous a church-planter, as Christianity has ever known; suffering always this mysterious thorn in the flesh – as though at war with himself – never quite comfortable in his own skin, or, as he called it, 'this body of death' – but able to embrace his weaknesses on account of being prised open by them to encounter God's all-sufficient grace.

In today's gospel, none of Jesus' peers, or his neighbours and friends – even among his own family – will take him seriously. This hardness of heart frustrates his ministry to the point of ineffectiveness – a salutary experience of failure, the hidden gift of which his disciples must also learn to accept: 'If any place will not welcome you . . . as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet.'

John Oman has described this 'shaking off the dust from one's feet' as a dominically instituted, but sadly neglected, 'sacrament of failure'. Such is our desire for self-sufficiency, to manage under our own steam – such is our zeal to *earn* those things that can only be freely *given* that Jesus protects us, so Oman suggests, from ourselves.

Better shake the dust from our feet, to live grace-fully with 'failure', that to assume the idolatrous and crushing burden of ultimate responsibility for what we imagine 'success' to be. As Oman, writing in the 1920s, explains:

[Christ] so taught His followers to value truth and love men that it may seem impossible to admit failure. Men's greatest dangers lie near their grand virtues, and His servants might have laboured at the impossible till their faith was tried beyond endurance, and their usefulness come to an end. Or . . . worse, the energy, which should have been spent in the proclamation of the truth, would have been diverted to the embellishment of it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See John Oman, *Vision and Authority* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 308-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 308-9

Baptism is just such a shaking off – a washing off – of all that impedes Christ's healing touch upon us and others: a decisive turning away from things that are death-dealing in order to turn towards those that are life-giving. And yet in this turning away from death, there is a dying of sorts.

We are baptised into Christ's death, Paul reminds us – into that sign of catastrophic failure, the cross – because in order to be fully alive some things in us must die: one paradigmatically in baptism, and daily in the life of discipleship so begun.

The scandal of the gospel – the offence it caused and causes still – is precisely that we *don't* get what we deserve, and therefore that we are strongest when most fully aware of our weakness; richest when faced with the full extent of our need. There are many reasons why this may not seem like good news, and the temptation to make it more palatable – less counter-intuitive – is real and persistent. We can recognise it in our tendency to carry around the accumulated dust of our failure to live as though this were so, which is really just the flip-side of all the self-justifying behaviour we cling on to for the same grim death.

The shaking off of this suffocating, obscuring dust, is thus at the heart of the proclamation of God's Kingdom and of the call to discipleship: a call Hugh and Lucy, and their sponsors, respond to today through the waters of the font. It's the same invitation issued from this table: to draw near in the unembellished, unencumbered truthfulness of our thorn-bedevilled flesh, resting in the perfecting and completing grace of the One who calls us.

For only when so liberated from the fear of failure – the fear that we *do* get what we deserve – only then can this One send us out, empty-handed, to face our own demons and to help others face theirs.

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