

Sunday 7A

Today's Gospel sees Jesus progressing through his Sermon on the Mount. And today we come to the highest point, to the rhetorical peak of his sermon. "You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Among all the elevated teachings of Jesus, this one stands out above the rest. Not even the saints have lived up to that lofty ideal. The question naturally arises, therefore: is Jesus setting us up to fail?

That's a question worth pondering, if only to make us think more deeply about what success and failure in the spiritual life might actually look like. When we think success and failure, we think of targets – targets that we set ourselves and then either meet or don't. You aim to become a professional sports person, to start your own business, to give up smoking – and you make it. You hit your target. That's success. Or, you decide to lose weight, to write a novel, to fast on Fridays – and you don't stick it out. You miss your target. That's failure.

I'm not sure God sees things in the same way. Listen again to the words of St Paul in the second reading. "There is nothing to boast about in anything human." The targets we set ourselves, meeting or missing those targets – those are human things. They're *our* targets, and *our* efforts to attain them. According to St Paul, God is not impressed by such things. He's not a judge on Strictly Come Dancing, holding up numbers, judging us on our performance. He doesn't measure success and failure in that way.

If not in that way, then how? By two things. Firstly, by humility. And secondly, by love. And both of these things are independent of targets and goals, of success and failure understood in human terms.

Let's think about humility first. How could you ever target being humble? Say you make a new year resolution to be humble, and every day you get out of bed and smash it. Day by day you get humbler and humbler. By the end of the year, you've cracked it. St Francis of Assisi couldn't hold a candle to you. You're a master of humility.

Except that, of course, you're not. You're only a master of self-deception. Why? Because humility can't be targeted like that. It can't be aimed at and achieved like any other human achievement. Humility cannot be achieved *except* in failure. Humility requires something to be humble about! That's why St Paul says there's nothing to boast about in anything human. It would of course be *easier* if we could target humility and achieve it like anything else. But in that case, it would be reduced to a human accomplishment, *our* work rather than God's work in us.

So, humility cannot be approached through conventional categories of success and failure. The same is true of love. Do you remember what Jesus said to the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee? "One who has been forgiven little shows little love." The woman in that episode had a bad reputation, and apparently it was well deserved. She was, you could say, a moral and spiritual failure. But Jesus wasn't interested in that. Love, he explained to his host, is often *inversely* related to "success" or "high performance" in keeping the Law. The Pharisees were good at keeping the Law. But it was the woman, not Simon or any of the other Pharisees, who Jesus singled out for the greatness of her love. Once again, therefore, we see how little interest God has in success and failure as measured by human standards.

When Jesus said "you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect", he meant it. But he also knew we couldn't attain it. I asked at the beginning whether Jesus was setting us up

to fail. In a sense, you could say yes. But why should that matter? As we've seen, God isn't especially bothered by our failures, nor for that matter by our successes. What he's really bothered about is humility and love. That's what draws his gaze towards us. And it's very difficult to grow in those things without some experience of moral and spiritual failure. Our failures cause us pain, but if we use them as an opportunity to grow in humility and love, then they will have served the purpose God has in permitting them.