

Sermon for Lent 4B

The text: Numbers 21:4-9

Success or failure!! What do you want for your life?

No one sits there as a 10 year old and hopes they experience more failure than success in the decades to come! We want to be successful in our studies! Successful in our extra-curricular activities! If we play sport or learn an instrument we want success – not failure! When it comes to our careers, or our business, or our farms – we don't want failure, we want success!

We want to be successful when it comes to relationships! No one wants a “failed” marriage! We want to be successful at making good friends! We certainly don't want to fail as parents!

The world puts a high value on success. It's usually measured in terms of money – reputation – influence – and power! If you earn plenty of money – you're a success! If you have a great reputation – you're a success! If you influence others and inspire – you're a success! If you have the power to get things done and achieve your goals – you're a success!

The world values success. But in our lives we sometimes experience failure. And failure comes at a cost. We fail – a job is lost, or a financial investment flops! We fail – a reputation is tarnished! We fail – a relationship is finished! We fail – dreams and hopes for the future are left in tatters!

I think there are many of us who harbour deep feelings, maybe even hidden wounds, of failure! And maybe deep down we see ourselves as failures!

Spiritually we're born failures – we're born in bondage to sin! But we all know what it's like to fail morally, to fail relationally/socially, to fail physically and mentally, to even fail academically, vocationally or financially!

Failure is experienced by every human being and it can be a real and costly problem for us! The cost of failure can be feelings of deep guilt and shame! The cost of failure can be overpowering emotional or physical pain!

Ultimately the cost of our being born spiritual failures – in bondage to sin –is death!

Failure comes in various forms, and it can be a real problem with real costs to our lives.

We see a picture of failure in the reading from Numbers today. The chosen people of Israel – rescued miraculously, fed with manna and quail. They failed when it came to being patient and trusting. They failed when it came to being thankful to God and resting in His care. They failed big time when they spoke against God.

And this failure became a problem – there was a cost. The problem ended up being a heap of venomous snakes sent to bite them and give them a dose of deadly poison. Many of them died - it was a costly failure!

The solution to the problem is really a bit of a weird one. God told Moses to *“make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live”*.

It might have taken a while for Moses to make a bronze snake – but eventually it was in place and *“when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake,”* they lived.

If snakes weren't your problem you might've looked at the bronze snake on a pole and thought nothing of it! You might've even been repulsed by the bronze snake on a pole!

But for some reason God, who could've healed them all without a bronze snake, attached His promise of healing and life to *this* material thing.

God didn't say make a dove or a lamb. He chose to have them look at a snake. Even though snakes were the problem. Snakes were the result of their failure! It's a weird solution to the problem. But as we read on in Scripture we see that God is consistent in not working the way that human beings might think He should!

You probably know where this is going!

The people that knew the poison was a problem for them were happy to look at the bronze snake – even though snakes were the problem and it was a symbol of their failure and death.

What do we look to when we realise the root cause of all of our failure?
When we know that our real problem is the poison of sin that's in us?

We look to a man lifted up – dying or dead on a cross! A picture that sums up our *problems*: shame, guilt, pain, death, separation from God! We actually look at something that's a symbol of our failure!

It's fair enough that people don't understand how looking to the cross of Christ is the solution to the ultimate human problem. It's just as weird as a snake on a pole isn't it?

Different people react differently to the Cross! Some people think nothing of it – it means nothing to them!
Some people find it repulsive!

What do you feel when you look at the cross?
What do you see when you look at the cross – especially one with Christ crucified still on it?

On Good Friday – would you have rated Jesus a success or a failure? Surely He's the ultimate picture of failure! A poor man with reputation in tatters! Influence and inspiration of others – zero! Power – seemingly non-existent!

Some people today still look at the cross and think nothing of it or are repulsed –because to them it represents nothing but failure! The failure of a religion that can't meet their needs. The failure of a religion that's irrelevant and out of touch with our society. The failure of a religion that's just about judgment and condemnation.

To many the Cross represents a religion that is just failing on so many levels as churches empty, as clergy cause disgrace. But when we look at the Cross, especially the man on the cross, we can give thanks and praise the living God! This apparent failure was actually the greatest blessing.

For those of us who realise our biggest problem is the poison of sin – that we're born spiritual failures and that sin is behind every other failure we experience in life – we look at Jesus, a picture of failure, and we see the source of our success! We see love, forgiveness, peace, hope and life!

We see also that our God can do great work through what looks and feels like failure. Don't ever look at yourself and see yourself as a failure. Look at Jesus on the cross and see all your failure there. Dealt with there by God!

All your failure and what it's cost you – all your stupidity, selfishness, and weakness. All the rejection, disappointment, shame, and guilt; all the pain and even your death. Jesus took it all on Himself and it's dealt with! It's God's!

Thankfully God's still providing weird but effective solutions to our problems! God's attached His promise of healing and life to material things like water, bread and wine – and He now sees Jesus! He sees the perfect righteousness of His Risen Son! He sees success - when He sees you!

God's love for you will never fail! God's love for you has you placed in Jesus the risen Lord. The old has gone the new has come. Daily you're a new Creation! You're a child of God with a new beginning every day – the resurrection life of Jesus is yours and at work in your life - turning failure into success!

All your failures – all your sins, all your guilt, shame, pain and death. Consider it all dealt with by God through the cross of Jesus! And know that having been baptised into the risen Lord Jesus, having been fed with pure grace – His body and blood – you are one of God's success stories!

Praise be to Jesus! Amen!