Open Door: Messing up and keeping on

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Readings:

• Luke 9:51–56

• 1John 1:5-10

Have you ever got anything wrong?

You see, I seem to mess up quite a lot.

I once made a mistake at work that added several weeks to a project timeline.

I lose my temper. Fairly often, in fact. Just ask my family.

Last week I forgot to order the kids school lunches which meant we suddenly had to scrape together a packed lunch.

And I have also, more than once, missed my godchildren's birthdays and had to send things after the day.

Sometimes the things we get wrong hurt ourselves or other people, and sometimes they're just annoying – they cause delays, create more work, or, just leave us feeling frustrated.

And as some of you know, yesterday I stood in front of the Bishop of Ely and was licensed as a lay minister.

That means that I am licensed by the Bishop to a teaching and preaching ministry, both within the church and outside it. And, as many of you know, I feel particularly passionate about supporting the amazing work that we do in our wider community, and about developing our role in social justice.

It's a privilege, and I am very excited about it. But the thing is, I'm still the same person I was yesterday morning.

Even though I'm now a licensed lay minister, I think it's pretty safe to say that I'm still going to mess up. Despite three years of training and 15 essays and the Bishop's blessing, I am not about to stop getting things wrong. And similarly, I'm afraid that Sxxxx, Oxxxxx and Rxxxxx are probably not going to be better behaved children just because they've been baptised today!

Because baptism doesn't make us perfect. And neither does becoming a priest, or a lay minister, or a churchwarden, or a parent, or a leader of any kind.

And I think that's something we are increasingly uncomfortable with.

We live in a culture that has become a bit obsessed with perfection. With excellence. With getting things right. We do not allow people to fail.

This is particularly true for those holding high-powered or public positions. The economy falters and a country leader has to step down. A football team loses an important match and the manager resigns. In business, a bad end of year result, can mean that those at the top to leave. We expect mistakes to have immediate consequences, and we expect people to be replaced when things don't go according to plan.

Society doesn't seem to allow change to take time. We've confused accountability with immediacy. Failure is punished faster, more publicly and more completely than ever before.

We sack people, force resignations, demand answers — and then sometimes act surprised when nothing fundamentally improves.

And perhaps, in doing so, we're forgetting how to navigate failure.

Because if people don't stay around long enough to experience failure, to learn from it, to repair what has been damaged and to demonstrate what happens when things don't go quite right, then how do we ever learn how to recover?

We're shown so many perfect lives on social media that we have perhaps subconsciously begun to think that this is the reality we need to strive for.

Tidy homes. Well-behaved children. Career successes. Happy, harmonious holidays.

I don't know about you, but my life doesn't look like that.

But you know what? I think that's OK.

Because it turns out that the Bible is full of people who get things wrong. They’re all over both the Old and New Testament but today let's just look at Jesus' disciples — the twelve friends he chose to spend time with, and who he asked to continue his ministry after he left.

In our gospel reading we heard about James and John and their moment of messing up. When a Samaritan village refuses to welcome Jesus, they suggest calling down fire from

heaven to destroy the whole village and get a bit of a telling off from their friend. (Luke 9:51-56)

And take Simon Peter. When Jesus tells his friends that he is going to have to suffer, Peter rebukes him when some sympathy and trust might perhaps have been what Jesus hoped for. (Mark 8:32).

And then there's Matthew who was a tax collector - someone working within the Roman system, and a profession associated with exploitation and oppression.

And poor Philip, when faced with the five thousand hungry people, basically tells Jesus that there is just no way they are going to be able to feed them all. (John 6:1-13)

These are not people who always got it right.

And yet Jesus didn't fire them. He didn't say, "Well, you've clearly demonstrated that you aren't up to the job. I'll find some better disciples." In our reading, Jesus does give James and John a bit of a telling off. But then off they go together to another village with a fresh chance to do better.

Despite their mistakes he continued to walk alongside them, taught them, challenged them and forgave them. And eventually, he entrusted his ministry to them. And these people who got things wrong went on to do extraordinary things for God.

Peter, who had misunderstood Jesus and later denied him, became one of the leaders of the early church.

James, who had once wanted to call down fire on people who rejected Jesus, is remembered in Christian tradition for his martyrdom.

Matthew, the tax collector, became associated with the Gospel that bears his name.

The point isn't that their mistakes didn't matter. The point is that their mistakes weren't the end of the story.

And I think that is one of the most important things the Bible teaches us about failure. God doesn't expect us to get everything right all the time. He knows that we're going to mess up. In a letter to the early church in 1 John we read "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8). God knows that sometimes we make bad decisions. He knows that sometimes we get tempted to do things we shouldn't. He knows that sometimes we say things we shouldn't say. He knows that we sometimes do things without thinking it through properly. And whilst

knowing that we mess up doesn't make it OK the Christian story tells us that, unlike in our society, failure does not have to be the end.

Our imperfection helps us to acknowledge God's perfection and our need of God's grace. And God seems remarkably good at taking our mistakes, our stumbles and even our brokenness and using them as opportunities for grace, spiritual growth and restoration.

So if failure is inevitable, how should we respond to it?

I think there are a few things and I'll leave you with these:

Firstly, if it's needed we should say sorry.

To the people we hurt when we mess up. And to God.

When we do something wrong, we need to take responsibility. When our mistakes cause us to sin, we need to turn back towards God.

As our reading from 1 John reminds us, when we confess our sins, God is faithful and forgives us.

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1John 1:9)

We don't have to hide our mistakes. We don't have to construct perfect versions of ourselves for other people to see. We can admit when we've got it wrong. We can ask forgiveness. We can make amends. And we can begin again.

Second, we need to help each other.

In Ecclesiastes it says:

"Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."

That's what Christian community is supposed to be: not a community of people who never fall but a community of people who help each other up when we do.

And I think that's part of what we are doing today in baptism. Baptism isn't a graduation ceremony for people who've got their lives sorted; it's entry into a community of grace and making promises to live a life that belongs to Christ. Or in the case of Sxxxx, Oxxxxx and Rxxxxx their parents and godparents have made promises to support them in that journey.

They are being welcomed into a community of people who will walk alongside them, celebrate with them, challenge them, encourage them, pray for them — and, when they

fall, help them get back up.

Third, we should pray for our leaders and those in public positions.

The world does sometimes have a right to hold leaders to a higher standard. Leadership carries responsibility, and people in positions of authority need to be accountable for what they do. But that makes navigating failure extremely difficult especially in today's culture. So let's pray for them.

And as I begin this new chapter as a licensed lay minister, I would really value your prayers. Pray for me as I learn what this ministry looks like. Pray for me as I inevitably get some things wrong. And, when I do get things wrong, help me to get back up.

I hope that we can be the kind of church where we can hold one another accountable without giving up on one another. Where we can challenge one another and still extend grace. I'm sure I will need your grace and you will need mine.

And finally, don't give up.

Don't give up because you've failed. Even the darkest moments of defeat do not cancel God's ultimate purpose or love for your life. What God seems to ask of us is not perfection, but faithfulness. (Luke 16:10).

Faithfulness when things are going well and faithfulness when we have made a complete mess of things.

Today, as Sxxxx, Oxxxxx and Rxxxxx are baptised, I encourage you to pray for them as they begin their journey with our God of grace. Pray that they would know that they are loved and treasured not because they will always get things right, but because they belong to God and welcomed into our community.

You will get things wrong. I will get things wrong. Our children will get things wrong. Our leaders will get things wrong. The church will get things wrong. But failure is not the end of the story, because we follow a God who is in the business of forgiveness, restoration and new beginnings.

Amen