

Reflection for Sunday 4th July 2021
Ezekiel 2; 1-7 2 Corinthians 12; 2-10

What's success?

Have you ever thought about success? What is success? Are there different understandings of success? And final question (to start us thinking) how do we judge success? These are important questions to address after the two Bible Readings. Was Ezequiel successful? Was Paul successful? And it might lead on to more personal questions – how have we as individuals fared? How has the United Reformed Church come across? And by what measure are we to judge the success?

Before anything else, I would just like to point out that there are some “success signs” that I would much rather run a mile from. Or not want the church to even come close to I will come back to that later.

Ezekiel lived and spoke out when the people of God were exiles in Babylon. He is known for visions of the Chariot of Fire and the Valley of the Dry Bones, among others. And his message was a struggle to proclaim and to listen to. Today's reading is part of his calling, one that seems to be doomed to fail, and not many of us would want to respond to such a calling. And yet we become aware that God sees things in a different way from how humans see them. For example:

- Ezequiel who in chapter 1 is son of Buzi, now becomes “Son of Adam”, or mortal man,
- It told “do not be afraid”, but he is afraid more than once,
- They shall know there is a prophet among them, but that doesn't sound too optimistic.

What we learn is that the calling is not one for human acceptance, it is a mission from God. So how will Ezequiel be successful?

And Paul, who founded the church in Corinth and loves it dearly, though he struggles all his life with them. We know the letter to this church are authentic Paul, written around the 50's, long before any of the Gospels. Paul speaks about this man who had a vision in which he is allowed to see the third heaven. And all agree this man is Paul himself. And this is the first time he is talking about it, because he doesn't want to brag about such things. Was this vision a gift or a curse? Probably both!

All Paul wants to talk about is the weakness he experiences, this is something that drags him down, not pulls him up. Would this be seen as success? The thorn in the flesh, of which we know nothing at all. We can all identify with the feeling I am sure – a thorn, a splinter, an ingrown toenail. Suddenly something like that becomes ‘the centre of our universe’ – it hurts like mad. And it hurts Paul so much so that he has prayed for its removal more times than he can remember. Is this thorn something physical? Something spiritual? Something relating to mental health? We will never know, but all we do know is that what would be enough to destroy a way forward, suddenly becomes Gospel = Good News. And it is never going away!

Paul doesn't want to highlight the extraordinary (= the vision) but rather of the ordinary (= the thorn in the flesh). And that is the message. While the world seems to value the

prestigious, fortune, fame, physical beauty, talents, which will exclude all those deemed not to have reached those standards, God is pointing in a different direction, to what the world rejects, what the world does not value.

While Corinth seems to question Paul, Paul responds with these words: I have taken nothing. So, what is important? What is successful? And while Ezequiel is warned it will seem most people will not even listen to him, and the people will continue to be prisoners in Babylon, he continues to speak God's message. So, what is success? On one hand all seems to point to "I can do this, it's the result of my own effort", God is saying: "My grace is sufficient. My power is made perfect in weakness". And this is so different from what we are used to that it is hard to understand and to live by.

In a world in which "the survival of the fittest" seems to be the way forward, all we will discover is the pain and destruction of the small, of the different, of the weak, and yet what we read is "**when I am weak I am strong**". I don't want a life of success built on appearances, but empty of value. I don't want a church successful with hundreds of people sitting on pews, but indifferent to the needs of the world. I think our success is based on the love we share, a love that leads us to a warm welcome to all people, not on the finance that buys luxury, or power, or prestige.

Where in human eyes, both Ezequiel and Paul would seem failures, in God's eyes they are successful because of their faithfulness to God's call. And this is where we should focus; what is successful in our vision of the church? These readings will give us good material for thought, but we will be talking about these matters in the short term. As lockdown eases, we have a new way ahead we must walk in a new direction, in many ways it might be quite different from the past, and that is a challenge. Our calling is one of love, of service and to be prophetic in these times, and God will be present in this walk. Amen.

Collect for this Sunday –

God of unearthly wisdom, we take offence at your humanity; we lose our faith that you can change us: come to us who are your own; convert our inward-looking eyes and take us on the road where all is lost and all is gained, through Jesus Christ, the prophet. Amen

Prayers for an inclusive Church