

Failure and Perfection

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As a small child, I had two favourite picture books. One was *Ferdinand the Bull*, whom I loved to see sitting under the cork tree smelling flowers while the bullfighters raged. Of the other, I cannot remember the title, but its story and pictures have stuck with me. It was about a rotund and happy-looking friar or monk. He wanted to build a church so as to glorify God, and he set about doing just that with suitable supplies of stone and wood. It turned out that his desire to please God was much greater than his competence as a stonemason or builder, and his construction collapsed and looked for all the world like a pile of rubble.

As you can imagine, he sat around looking despondent for a while, thinking himself a total failure. But, before too long, he heard a pained meowing and, looking around, saw a cat stuck up a tree. Helping himself to some of his rubble, he hurried to build a precarious-looking pile and, although he was short and plump, he managed to bring the cat down to safety.

Other similar events occurred and, before long, an agglomeration of beasts of different sorts were sheltering under the rubble or using it for various purposes. Our friar was in clover. Surrounded by a loving congregation of a type for which he had never sought to provide, he had discovered what he had really been meant to construct all along. We were left, at the end of the book, with his rosy-cheeked beatitude as he relished the perfection of where he ended up.

The book's lesson—that perfection is not the opposite of failure, and that failure is rather its friend—was, of course, lost on me for several decades between my early childhood, when it was clear enough, and high adulthood. In the intervening years, ambition, aspiration, determination, and resolve—a firm sense of where I was going—had taken their cruel hold of me, giving me to be who I thought I was. By about the age of forty, however, I had had significant experience of failure; there was plenty of ecclesiastical-looking rubble scattered around my life, and nothing remotely like a standing church. Then I remembered my childhood picturebook with affection, wondering if perchance there might be any equivalents of cats-up-a-tree or other beasts whom I would have the pleasure of meeting amidst the patternless chaos of my rubble.

And so, of course, there have been and are.

I share all this since I hope it explains why I have a high positive regard for perfection. For those who have never seriously failed, perfection, when it is not an addiction (and therefore obviously a pathology), is so often an irritant: an enemy of the ordinary good, bringing with it a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction at every endeavour and, often enough, envy at others' successes. When those who have yet to undergo failure discuss perfection philosophically it becomes, frankly, a

bit of a bore, leading to definitions of what things, or experiences, *should* be, with little reference to what they are, or who the people really are who are supposed to be having them.

From the gateway, however, that is opened up to us by serious failure—for instance, of career, or marriage, or even a reputation-destroying moral lapse—perfection is indeed something rather wonderful: a dynamic sense that comes towards us from other-than-ourselves, something given that cannot be grasped and in which we can rest and delight; in short, a hint of God giving God-self away.

I think that this goes straight back to what is most basic in Christianity, which is that, out of love for us, God came among us as a failure. The image of God-self, by which God wished to let us know what God is like, was that of an apparent failure: One who was not rescued from failure, but whose very failure was shown to the apostolic witnesses to have been the true shape of what God's power and wisdom looked like. In John's Gospel, the last word Jesus says on the Cross, *τετέλεσται* (*tetelestai*), is usually translated as "it is finished" or "it is accomplished," though it could just as well be translated "it is perfected" or, simply, as an expression of something perceived or achieved: "perfection!" The Epistle to the Hebrews picks this up when it points out that Jesus was perfected in going to his death: "he was made perfect by the things he underwent" (2:10; cf 5:8–9). The same Epistle also points out that he did this joyfully: "for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despised the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God" (12:2).

But what a bizarre notion of perfection this is! In order to try to make some sense of it, I'm going to ask you to do some imagining.

Imagine that you live in a stable world, in which most people (including yourself, of course) are mostly good; some peccadillos, of course, but mostly good. From this starting point, it would seem that belief in God means that you can get a sense, from what is around you, of the goodness of God. There is a straightforward link between the things you see—the hugeness of mountains, the beauty of hummingbirds, and the power of waves, for instance—and the hugeness and beauty and power of God. Naturally, you have to multiply those created qualities many times over to come close to those of God, in whom they are perfected, but basically they are on the same pitch. Then you can also look around at others who are not good—those in need of redemption, who are genuinely not good at all: traitors, murderers, addicts, rapists, loan-sharks, price-gougers, people-traffickers. You can imagine why God, in God's goodness, wanted to knock them into shape, which he did by sending a redeemer to die for them so that they could be converted and be conformed to that good order which you respect, and could grow in ways to which you aspire.

Of course, since you are a good Catholic, or a good Christian, you make a polite nod in the direction of being in need of forgiveness yourself, even go to confession from time to time. But there is a difference between you and those people: there is a straight line between your life, your sense of order, and that of God, while there is only rupture between their lives and that of God.

The shocking thing about the Apostolic Witness to the perfection of Jesus' failure and what it means for us is that it explodes that picture for good. For it was the goodness, the beauty, and the order of this world, which seemed so stable, so fine, and so much like God, which was turned on

its head by the realisation that all the goodness, the beauty, the power, the wisdom, and, yes, the perfection of God had shown itself to us in the misery, pain, sorrow, shame, and death of one accused of blasphemy and sedition.

What this means is that God's perfection is always, always, going to appear to us as more of a rupture than a continuation of any of our senses of perfection—and that entering into that rupture in order to experience a re-creation is not the preserve of “bad people,” whom we call failures, but a necessity for all of us. For the very goodness to which we cling—our much-prized virtues and the stability that they seem to bring to our social life—is at least as much of an obstacle, if not more, to our finding ourselves on the inside of the great adventure of new creation, as anything bad we may do—the sorts of thing which might land us in shame, failure, loss of face, and reputation. And the weakness that comes with failure is the place within which the power and dynamic of the new creation most fruitfully dwells, and from which the line to perfection is most straightforwardly drawn. This is what St. Paul tells us himself in 2 Corinthians 12:9: “but [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

One of the most difficult things for any of us who try to live, and to share, the Christian story is to be faithful to two apparently contradictory pulls. On the one hand, there is the hugeness of the rupture between what might seem perfect to us and what we are astounded to discover are the sort of moments of perfection which are only available to us when we are at the end of our tether, or beyond it. And, on the other hand, there is the sense that we are loved just as we are, that we are safe, that all is well, that there is a certain contentment and satisfaction with what is. The tension is between the relaxation which we experience through the gift of faith and the sense of being stretched beyond ourselves which we experience through the gift of hope; a tension which can only be inhabited with love.

I'd like to look at one of the most familiar and richest of the New Testament texts concerning this tension, this perfection. This is what Our Lord teaches in Matthew 5:43–48:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Our Lord starts by weaning us from what seems normal: loving those close to us and hating those who threaten us. He points out that there is no link—no direct line at all—between that pattern of desire and the pattern of God's desire. In fact, our only access to God's pattern of desire is via the rupture of our learning to see our enemies as ourselves and seeking the good of those who persecute us—being towards them, completely and generously, without being over and against them in any way at all. For that is how God is: God's love for us is as love for enemies; it presupposes our hostility to God's generosity, to the fact that God is entirely removed

from our sense of good and bad. The apparently banal, stable generosity we see in sunshine and rain, day and night, is in fact kept dynamically alive by a veritable storm of passionate love for those who reject and scarcely recognize it.

So we are commanded to break out of all reciprocity: not only the “tit for tat” in which we engage with our enemies, but also the *quid pro quo* we engage in with other insiders so as to be able to enjoy, as the failures and outcasts we will undoubtedly become in the eyes of all strong belonging systems, the huge adventure of unimaginable horizons into which we are being summoned to participate.

A sunset, a particular moment of unexpected delicacy in an operatic sextet, the tiniest turning towards love of an ungrateful child, a moment of contentment between partners in a publicly scorned relationship; these are, above all, glimpses of perfection when we have learned, in our failures, to let go of our grasp on what is good so that we can be surprised by the fierce tenderness of one who wants to overcome all our unrecognized hostility so as to crown us with glory.

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