

Success and struggle go together

22 May 2022 – Easter 6

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

We all like winners.

We're told that winners are gridders.

We're told that winning isn't the main thing ... it's the only thing.

But for every winner, there is always a loser and often many, many losers.

So if we shift our thinking a little, what does success look like away from the sporting field?

What would a successful outcome in Ukraine look like?

What would a successful church look like?

And with all the focus on winning at all costs, where is the right balance between success and struggle? These are some of the questions we'll be thinking about today.

BIBLE READINGS

[Acts 1:8 – the theme verse for the whole book of Acts ...](#)

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

[Acts 4:1-3, 7:54-59 – the disciples are persecuted in Jerusalem ...](#)

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day ...

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard what Stephen said, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. ... While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'

[Acts 14:19-20, 16:19-23, 21:27-31 – Paul is persecuted, quite often ...](#)

When Paul was in the region of Galatia, some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city,

thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. ...

When Paul was in Philippi, the owners of a slave girl ... seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, 'These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise.' The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ...

When Paul returned at last to Jerusalem, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, 'Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.' ... The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar.

MESSAGE Success and struggle go together

The world loves success ... especially on the sporting field



... but also in politics.

And in these two fields at least, success is usually equated with winning.

But in other areas, success is harder to pin down.

- What does a successful **marriage** look like, for instance? Is it measured by the number of years, or the shared interests or by the depth of the relationship?



- How about success in international relations? Will Ukraine be considered successful if Russia ‘only’ takes over territory along the Black Sea and in the east?



- Or in church, what does success look like and how does it relate to growing the kingdom of God in our midst?



Often of course, success is in the eyes of the beholder.



The book of Acts is often held up to be a book about success and glory ... Peter preaches at Pentecost and we're told that 3000 people join the community. Soon the number is 5000 and later in the book, James the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem claims that many thousands among the Jews now believe in Jesus.

As we read in the second half of the book, it seems that wherever Paul preaches, a large number of Gentiles – and usually a small number of Jews – become Christians. Women as well as men become leaders in the church. The Holy Spirit is seen to be directing the witness of the church and nothing, it seems, can stop the spread of the gospel message.

But is all of this just positive spin or are we only hearing half the story?

There is another darker, uglier side to the story, that we too easily gloss over ... alongside the successes, we also read that ...

Peter and John are intimidated and imprisoned by the temple authorities on several occasions

Stephen, as we read this morning, is stoned to death

James, the brother of John, is executed by Herod

Many disciples are persecuted and forced to leave Jerusalem

... and Paul, initially an active persecutor of the church, becomes a reluctant follower of Jesus and is later flogged and beaten, is nearly stoned to death, is imprisoned twice – the second time lasting several years – and nearly drowns

So while there is **success** there is an equal measure of **struggle** and **suffering**. And often the success and the struggle seem to go together ...

When we think about the struggles of these early followers of Jesus, though, I wonder if you can recall another character in the story who also was arrested, flogged, put on trial and then executed?

Jesus ... who in many ways is the role model for each character in Acts.

I wonder how it make us feel to hear that Peter and Paul suffered similar treatment to Jesus, with both being eventually executed by the Roman state? Each took up their cross and followed in the footsteps of Jesus.



Struggle and suffering come in many forms – they may be physical, emotional, social. No-one is exempt from struggle and suffering. Yet most of the time our lives are relatively easy – even luxurious compared to most people in history and compared to the plight of many millions of people today around the world.

It's not possible of course to directly compare **our** struggles with those we read about in Acts ... but one thing that is clear is that we rarely face direct in-your-face persecution for being a follower of Jesus. As Christians, we may be thought to be a little strange or nutty to follow the ways of a person who lived 2000 years ago, but in Australia we are unlikely to be flogged, imprisoned or executed because of our faith. Christians in some parts of the world are not so lucky as us.

But sometimes we do stick out our necks in following Jesus, whether by speaking out for those at the margins of our society or by calling people to consider the plight of the poor, the asylum seekers in our midst or for indigenous Australians. I know that even within the church I am sometimes criticized for being too political. Yet that is sometimes what is needed to follow Jesus.

When we do encounter opposition – or ridicule – or just stony silence – there are several **unhelpful** ways to respond. These include:

- blaming others (including God) for our discomfort
- complaining that we don't deserve to be rejected (because we are basically good people)
- acting as a victim (I'm suffering because I did this, or failed to do this).

Perhaps you can think of other unhelpful ways that we respond to rejection and suffering?

There are several rather more helpful ways to respond, that we find in the book of Acts. Rather than thinking 'Woe is me!', the early Christians often looked for a silver lining.

Struggle and suffering give us a fresh appreciation for the journey walked by Jesus

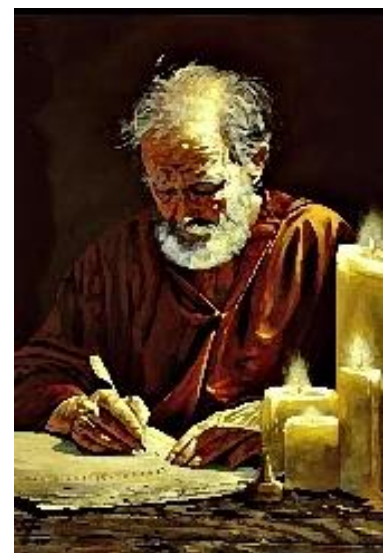
suffering may well give us a new empathy for others who suffer

it provides an opportunity to draw closer to God and rely more on God's strength and peace

and, perhaps like the early followers of Jesus, it provides opportunities to witness to others through our words, our attitudes and our actions

Interestingly, after **Peter** and **John** have been released from prison for teaching about Jesus and then go back to their church community, they do not pray to be protected from harm, but rather pray for **courage to speak the word with all boldness**.

As we know, **Paul** wrote many letters – we have 13 of them in our Bible. Many of these letters were written from prison, when Paul's fate of either pardon or death was hanging in the balance. In these grim circumstances, Paul continued to trust in God and looked for ways to continue to grow God's kingdom by encouraging many of the communities he had founded through his letters.



Success is great.

Struggle is part of life.

Suffering comes to all of us.

But whatever happens in our life, we have a **choice**.

We **choose** how to respond in each case.

There is always a balance in following Jesus – sometimes we find joy, sometimes we are rejected or suffer – and usually we find companions for the journey. As we follow the footsteps of Jesus, it's our **choice** whether we see the proverbial glass as **half full** or **half empty**.

Our **faith**, though, hopefully gives us a balanced perspective. If we say that we follow a crucified and risen Lord, who calls us to take up our cross every day and follow, then at times we must expect to struggle and to suffer as the early followers of Jesus did.

But we also know – based on Paul's experience – that if we come to God in prayer at such times, we too – like Paul – can experience the **peace of God** that surpasses our human understanding, a peace in the midst of the struggle, a peace that assures us that we do not walk alone, a peace that connects us with Jesus.

So when our world threatens to fall apart, as it did on numerous occasions for the early followers of Jesus, let us support and encourage one another and also expect to receive comfort from God, as our next song assures us. Originally there were two verses to this song, but Robin Mann later wrote a further two verses that we will sing this morning.

HYMN TiS 647 Comfort, comfort all my people

*Comfort, comfort all my people
with the comfort of my word.
Speak it tender to my people:
all your sins are taken away.*

Though your tears be rivers running,
though your tears be an ocean full,
though you cry with the hurt of living,
comfort, comfort.

Every valley shall be lifted,
every mountain shall be low,
every rough place will be smoother:

comfort, comfort.

Refrain

Though we build strong walls for prisons,
though we feast while others starve,
though we fill this world with weapons:
comfort, comfort.

Every prisoner will be rescued,
every hungry mouth be filled,
every gun will rust, forgotten:
comfort, comfort.

Refrain

Though we fracture God's creation,
though we stand so far apart,
though we fail to love each other:
comfort, comfort.

Every wall will crack and crumble,
every stranger will be friend,
every one embrace another:
comfort, comfort.

Refrain

Though your eyes see only darkness,
though your eyes can see no light,
though your eyes see pain and sorrow:
comfort, comfort.

Every night will have its morning,
every pain will have an end,
every burden will be lightened:
comfort, comfort.

Refrain

Words and music Robin Mann © 1975, 1988