

The Way Back When We Fall - Colin's sermon on 5 May

(Readings: Acts 9 and John 21)

For film and comic lovers, the awaited new film based on the Marvel comics and entitled "Avengers: Endgame" is now in cinemas. I haven't seen it, but my daughter's family have and they loved it. The film is based on the comic super heroes – Thor, Black Widow, Captain America, Iron Man and others.

Super heroes are very popular, aren't they? They are seen as people who bring good out of bad circumstances. Recent generations all seem to have super heroes to follow. But in the Christian faith, super heroes have been known for millennia. Hebrews 11 lists heroes and heroines of faith stretching back to Abel, son of Adam and Eve. Many of these can be looked at as super heroes because of the way that, through their faith, they overcame many dangers and difficulties.

Our two Bible readings today celebrate the lives of two super heroes of the Christian faith – Simon Peter and Paul. Their lives show us that anyone can have failures and failings but there is a way back to God when we fall or fail.

Simon Peter is remembered as the only disciple to walk on water and also as the disciple who denied knowing Jesus three times. He was a Galilean fisherman; someone who worked hard for a living, fishing in what could be dangerous waters.

He was brave and had a rock-like character, and was clearly open to new experiences. But he was also someone who often appeared to speak without thinking. Sometimes that was good – as when he declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Sometimes that was bad – as when he tried to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem, when Jesus had to rebuke him by saying, “Get behind me Satan”.

Simon Peter knew many ups and downs in his time as a disciple of Jesus. Finally, at the Last Supper, he proclaimed that he would never desert Jesus, even though others might. Jesus told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times that very night. Peter was devastated when that happened; he had denied knowing his Lord.

Even after the resurrection we can be sure that Peter continued to be troubled by his failure and felt that he was unloved by God because of it.

Peter had gone from being brash and brave where he laughed at any suggestion that he would deny Jesus; where he had taken a sword and cut off the ear of one of the men arresting Jesus; here he followed Jesus right into the lions' den – the courtyard of the High Priest. From brash and brave to suddenly knowing lonely fear, denial, failure and worthlessness. Can we imagine what that must have been like?

Peter had lost his way and his confidence and so went back to Galilee; back to fishing; back to where he felt comfortable. His thoughts must, even then, have continued to be dominated by what he felt was a fractured relationship with Jesus; always remembering his denials of Jesus.

Peter was a broken man. How could he come back from that feeling of failure? What would it take to bring Peter back from those depressive feelings? – just a miracle of fish, and the meeting with Jesus on the beach.

Peter's life shows us that there is always a way back to God after we feel that we have failed, as long as we make ourselves open to hearing Him speak to us.

I have shared with some of you that, thirty years ago, I had felt a call to full-time Christian ministry. I felt a failure when I failed to follow that through – primarily because I could not see how I could, financially, follow that course when I had a wife and dependent children to support.

That sense of failure continued until I recognised that God was opening another door to ministry – that of becoming a Reader. God removed my earlier sense of failure by providing another way of serving Him.

We have seen how Peter was restored in belief and encouraged to action. Peter, later filled with the Holy Spirit, was able to preach in public, resulting in three thousand people believing in Jesus and being baptised in one day. What a transformation!

Our other super hero, Paul, was very different to Peter. Although he was a tent maker by trade, he was also a highly educated man. In his letter to the Philippians, he describes himself as “... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless”.

Paul was educated by the leading scholar, Gamaliel. That was the equivalent today of an Oxbridge education.

With a C.V. like that Paul was so different from Peter. However, the two men were the same, in that they both failed to do what God wanted from them.

As Paul described himself, he was zealous in the persecution of the early Christians. For Saul, as he was at that time, God could only be worshipped through the rites and rituals of the Jewish faith. He saw Christianity as threatening that order of things. He was a willing onlooker at the stoning of Stephen. At the time of our reading, he was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of Jesus. Paul believed that he was in the right; that he was doing God's will. The problem was, he had not asked God whether this was what God wanted.

It is so easy to go off the road in our Christian lives by not bothering to seek God's will or because we do things totally reliant on our own powers and thoughts.

In the case of Paul, God obviously saw someone that he could use, despite of all the wrong that Paul was doing. But first he had to get his attention. What better way than by what happened on the

Damascus road! God's intervention could not be ignored by Paul – and the rest, as they say, is history.

Does God still intervene in people's lives to get their attention? I can only speak for myself. In November 1973, during an altar call in a service of adult baptism, I felt the pressure of hands in my back pushing me to go forward to make a decision to follow Jesus Christ. Those were not human hands. The rest, as they say, is history.

The lives of Peter and Paul show us that God knows us, understands when we go wrong, loves us enough to meet with us and through his grace brings us back to where he wants us to be. Their lives show us that there is a way back to God when we fall or fail. Our God is a God of New Beginnings.

We discussed the amazing grace of God at our Church weekend away, and what we see at work in Peter and Paul is part of the work of God's grace to us and in us. As the Christian writer Bill Crowder has said – "Grace is the heart of God that loves people".
That is for you and for me!