

TRINITY 2 10am EUCHARIST

BRISTOL CATHEDRAL

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Mark 3:20-end

We're just coming into that season of the year when we split into two factions: those who love watching sport and those who don't. The sport-lovers will have the dilemma of how many TV channels they can realistically watch or record simultaneously. The sport-haters will give up the idea of ever having possession of the remote control and will be looking for somewhere to hide until at least 15th July!

This summer season is also one of culmination and celebration in all sorts of other ways. You just have to look at the cathedral diary to see a whole range of examples – school end-of-term services, ordinations, graduations, valedictions, the choir tour. After an academic year of hard work, it's time for a bit of partying before a rest over the summer.

The focus on striving for success and celebrating afterwards is something which has always driven the human race. The adrenalin originally required to kill something to eat or to run away has over time been redirected to hone our physical and mental skills for recreation too. We have evolved into a competitive species which feeds on the risk of the contest and the joy of the celebration afterwards. And as a result, we have learned to crave success.

But our readings this morning throw us a bit of curveball – they call into question what we mean by success and whether or not we even recognise it. And they do so from three different directions.

In our Old Testament reading, the Israelites are falling for the idea of wanting a monarchy. Up to this point they have had a direct relationship with God – a theocracy – in which God’s will has been interpreted by prophets and judges from Moses to Samuel. But now Samuel is an old man with no worthy successors. Rather than asking God to show them who the next judge ought to be, the Israelites decide they want what everyone else has got – a king.

God marshals a whole range of reasons why that is a really bad idea. And previous events have already shown that when the Israelites align themselves properly with God, they are completely unstoppable in battle. Why on earth would they want anything except that direct access to him? But they are not in the mood to listen – and look at the reasons they give:

‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’ (1 Samuel 8:19-20)

All the evidence points in favour of keeping the theocracy, yet to the Israelites success now rests on having a visible figurehead, even if that person ends up treating them very badly. So God relents, and he even selects for them someone they can’t fail to approve as a suitable candidate. In chapter 9 we are told of a young man called Saul:

There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else. (1 Samuel 9:2)

Good-looking and tall, that's what success looks like as far as the Israelites are concerned – but he's only human, as the rest of the tale will tell.

Our Gospel reading looks at success another way. Do we recognise it if we see it, and do we like what we see?

The first part of Mark's Gospel has taken off apace with the start of Jesus' ministry, the calling of the disciples and quite a number of healings, such that everywhere he goes there is now a considerable crowd in tow.

You would think that looks like success: people cured of leprosy and paralysis who are set free to take up normal life in the community; a close-knit group of followers who will help Jesus with his work; and a very large number of people who can potentially be converted to the cause.

Surely that's all good stuff?

Maybe not. For two groups of people this looks at best like a threat, at worst like a disaster waiting to happen.

First, Jesus' family. To them, this situation is quickly spinning out of control and they need to go and stop him – but why?

It could well be out of concern for him because people have told them, 'he has gone out of his mind'. (Mark 3:21)

But it goes deeper than that.

In a society which is utterly rule-bound and where any misdemeanour will be reported to the religious authorities, behaviour which attracts the wrong kind of attention is dangerous. If other people think he's gone mad, that has enormous implications not just for him but also for the rest of the family. Will they be acceptable members of the community anymore? Domestic life as they know it will be gone – so they need to bundle him off-stage quickly and convince him to quieten down. This isn't just about Jesus – this is also their own survival mechanism kicking in.

Second, the Scribes – the religious authorities. These are the people who police the rules, of course. The very prophecies they know by heart are coming true in front of their eyes – revival is breaking out, in fact - and yet they don't like it one bit, because the rules are being set aside. They fear they may turn out to be irrelevant – and people who feel their power is being diminished tend to behave very badly. Their assessment – that Jesus himself is the devil – is blasphemous and that provokes his fury.

Ironically, earlier in Chapter 3, we are told:

Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, “You are the Son of God!” (Mark 3:11)

Evil recognises Jesus for the good that he is, and yet the religious leaders who are supposed to be on the look-out for the Messiah do not. Success is here, it's visible and tangible, yet it's not dressed up as the Scribes would like it to look – and worse still, it can't be attributed to them. They feel under threat – so they accuse Jesus of having an unclean spirit himself.

So we move on to first-century Corinth, a city with an unusual profile. The Romans had deliberately populated it with freedmen – people who had previously been slaves. Newly-liberated, they fetched up at Corinth and became part of a society which had no pre-determined class structure. And so the social jostling began. This explains the impression we get in the letters to the Corinthians that they are people obsessed with out-doing one another.

Corinth became a wealthy and sizeable port with plenty of opulent housing and all mod-cons. And it was the host city for the Isthmian Games, which ran every other year between the Olympic Games. Athletes and spectators from all over Greece would gather there and, just like our modern Olympics, temporary accommodation was required for them all. That's the reason why Paul was occupied as a tentmaker there – he was making tents for the athletes' village.

In this second letter to the Corinthians, he likens himself to a worn-out old tent. Now an elderly man, with some sort of physical impediment, he looks to them like someone on the scrapheap of life. And yet that's not how Paul measures success or failure. His perspective is quite different.

Success can't be measured by what you can see, let alone by what looks attractive, he says. What matters is what is going on inwardly. 'Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.' (2 Cor. 4:16).

Paul understands the radical truth that success, in God's eyes, is death on a cross for the sake of saving those who will otherwise be lost.

And, in being poured out as an apostle of Jesus, he is helping to further the reach of God's grace to the Corinthians and beyond, 'so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God' (2 Cor. 4:15). The good news of the saving power of Jesus is overwhelming: and, for Paul, the sole purpose of the remainder of his life is to make that Gospel known, until the 'earthly tent' he occupies is completely expended.

Success, as we are genetically-programmed to perceive it, is something which is visible, tangible, measurable, achievable, and we crave it. But in the face of suffering, illness or extreme old age, it can leave us feeling as though the best of what we were is but a distant memory. Our normal measures of success abandon us and leave us feeling bereft.

There is no easy or instant answer to that – if only there were! Yet Paul points us to a future which will surpass all of that and which will no longer relate to what we have achieved or failed to do here on earth. Present struggles are a 'slight momentary affliction' which are 'preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure' (2 Cor. 4:17).

We should never minimise the suffering of others and we should always do what we can to alleviate it. In the midst of personal crisis, such a 'slight momentary affliction' can feel more like an eternity here on earth. And reaching a stage of life which is marked by things you can no longer do is very tough. In that respect Paul achieves a level of spiritual maturity which is a real challenge to most of us ordinary folk.

But his words point us to a spiritual exercise we can usefully practice every day, whatever age we are or ability we have. As we live out the successes and failures of everyday life, we can ask God to teach us that these earthly tents we occupy are merely the training camp for our ultimate destination: the 'building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens' (2 Cor.5:1).