Failure and the Church

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[0:00] Morning everyone. Failure and the church. On February the 22nd, as you may know, or if you are into sort of spacey things, a robotic lander named Odysseus landed on the moon. It was the first time since Apollo 17 mission, which was 52 years ago, that an American spacecraft had landed on the lunar surface. As you will know from the news, it didn't land gracefully. It descended far too quickly.

And as you will know, if you follow these sort of things in the news, it tipped over when it landed. Was it a failure? Well, no, because NASA declared that this is not a failure in any way.
And it may not have been perfect in any way, but everything else went well. The takeoff went well. The preparation went well. The journey went well. The orbit went well. The landing was okay, but it was only one leg that failed. And it tipped over. Was that a failure? NASA says no. You know, why is it so often we focus on the failures? We're just drawn to it, aren't we? I don't know whether you've, with your screen that you look at, whether it's small or large, but there's pixels on a screen. Now, I'm told that a pixel, there's 105 pixels per inch, that's in old money, on there. And I will leave you to do the math as to what size your screen is and how many pixels are on there. But I don't know if you're like me. If one pixel breaks, which one do you focus on?
The one that's broken or the hundreds and the thousands that are working extremely well? Isn't it amazing how we are drawn to failure and we're drawn to focus on failure?
[2:38] And as I looked at the service today, I thought, and as we're in our Lenten journey, the cross for which we are so thankful, which is the heart of our salvation, which is everything that we know and believe in is our hope for the future because of all that Christ has done for us as we travel this journey, at the time was seen as so much as a failure on that day to so many. And yet we know how glorious it is for us personally to move from the cross.

As I looked at the service plan a few weeks ago, I must admit, I held my head in my hands thinking, the church and failure in Mother's Day. How does this go together? So like all good preachers, I prayed rather than go to Google. Prayer before Google always helps, by the way. And I sensed the Lord say, look at the church and she's my bride. The church is my bride. The church is my bride and she is pretty beautiful. Which led me to the reading that we heard this morning from 1 Corinthians, which is of course the go-to reading for most weddings. And it's often used as a sort of a sign by marriage course, isn't it? Of everything that we should be in our marriage. But anyway, this is a beautiful reading that can be used within the context of any relationship. Any relationship, if you put it under the mirror of Corinthians, that's how it should be, that we should love one another. And this picture that we are given, that how a relationship can blossom, flourish, and be sustained because the church is often called the bride of Christ. You know, you don't, you don't, well, I'll leave you to decide. But you know, the thing is, is when we marry, we hope and we hope on that day that things will be amazing. And Jesus invests so much in his church because he wants her to be the best that it can be. And as has happened here for many years, the music strikes up and the doors open at the back and there's a, of expectation. As the groom stands up here, probably looks over his shoulder. Many a groom will have been in tears at this point because, and they have seen this beautiful image of white, either in a meringue or something a little bit more understated, walking down this aisle, the bride that they have waited for and for this day.
You know, and God loves his bride, the church. We need to hold that. And hopefully the idea of being church brings many good things to mind for you. Certainly the word love. And even if today we walk away with that thing that goes love above failure, we'll have achieved what we seek to do in our message this morning. God loves his bride, the church, yet sadly reminds us that not all relationships can flourish and can be sustained for various reasons. And we understand that because we're human.

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And today is part of that as well. And there will be sadness where there has been fracture, or there has been pain, or there has been separation. And today we hold that. It's heartbreaking, not just for those involved, and we hold that pain today, but for those of us who observe that as well, and are around that. And we think, what on earth can we do when things unravel?
And as all scripture says, so it must break God's heart if you put it into the context of failure in his church. When love walks out the door and harsh words are said, when unkindness comes, when there is a lack of grace, when there is judgmental views, when his children fall out with one another, and the church family unit is divided by sin and conflict. And some, it's heartbreaking.
[7:12] The one prayer that probably hasn't been answered that Jesus prayed is that we would be one in his church. You know, down the years, political rulers and things have pronounced themselves as gods and as rulers. You know, don't get me wrong, I love the monarchy and things like that, but you know, we enthrone Jesus in our lives. He is the center of all we do. And post-reformation accelerated the growth of diversity in the church. The global body of Christians is now 2.34 million, but is now separated into thousands of denominations. You know, estimates show that there's 45,000 different denominations, large or small globally. In some cases that can't be good, that we should be one.

Some people refer to their church as their mother church. I quite like that. Some people refer to the cathedral as their mother church. Actually, I quite like the idea that our local church is the mother church. Why? Because the local church is there for us. Nurturing, encouraging, building up, gathering.
That is what the local church is for. The heart of what we do is the local church. And I quite like that. It's a mother who births and bring things into new life and sustains and encourages. They're growing in their pains, encourages, as we saw in the video, and also sends out. You know, this is very much at the heart of the heart of who we are. You know, as Christ Church, if you've joined us recently, or whether you were here when we joined together, we birthed a new church. We came together as two denominations, and something new was birthed and grew, and great things have grown out of that. And that image of the church is often reflected in the Bible as a family. And like it or not, we are not individuals. We are individuals. We are individuals, but we are grown for community. We are supposed to be in community. That is the Lord's plan for us, is part of the body of Christ. And each one of us is part of that body. And maybe if you don't know what you bring to the body, it may be a good time today to pray about that and say, Lord, what part of the body am I? What do I bring to this family?
What can I bring to this family? What can I contribute? We're not just individuals. We are one church, one faith, one Lord. And as a minister, and I am a long-life churchgoer. I have been going to church since I was taken in a pram, and I have stoically held in there through thick and thin, through divisions, through pain, and everything. And I declare now that I love the local church.
You know, sometimes we have to stand and say, I love the local church. It may not be perfect, but I love the local church. Love is patient. Love is kind. Why? Because it's our mission.
[10:39] Love should be at the centre. As Catherine read to us, love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonour others. It is not self-seeking.

It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Ouch! It keeps no record of wrongs.
Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. What a wonderful picture that is of the local church, of you and I.
And it's right for a son and daughter to love their mum, and millions of flowers will have been paid for and presented today. Hopefully not too many daffodils were picked on the way home from the pub at the last moment, for those who forgot. And even though the church has a thousand problems in every week, I don't know about you, it seems to me that there's another book or another report that comes out about things of where the church has failed, the wider church. Extolling where we have failed to call sin, sin, and the issues that beset the bride. The church, sadly, the bride they have pictured as becoming stained and marred. Yet the picture of his bride is beauty and love.
So hold this. Church, our mother church, is still Christ's beloved bride. And every week, pastors and small churches, large churches, paid staff, part-time staff, church members, everybody gives of their time and energy to share the gospel with others and to love the world and the community that we're called to serve. That's what we exist for, is to serve the community and to worship God. And to make our church best express the gospel when people come and need us and are part of us.

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[12:57] Why? Because we are called to love our mother church. Why? Because we love Jesus. It is that simple. The Holy Spirit works in us and through us, the church, despite our personal failings.

God hasn't divorced himself from his church. He will never leave us or forsake us. That was his promise. And he will always be there at the heart of us for us, his bride. I think that's something encouraging and to give thanks for. That is us, the local church, loved and known. And we are called to love others. And he values and encourages his church, like a mother to nurture like all mothers.

And those who have been mothers, who are those who are carers for all of those things. And even if we don't agree with that advice sometimes, God is there for us, because that's a mother's job, is to guide us, to guide us and to direct us. I can remember, as probably you can, many of the things that were instilled in us as children. Maybe you're here as a parent now, and maybe you might be here with your children. Remembering those days where there was those tough discussions about discipline and things and what you wanted for your children. It's so important, because I still give thanks for that, that good values were instilled for me as a child, you know? You know, to say thank you, to appreciate others, to be strong in faith, to be resilient in your decisions, to be thankful for the things that you had and the things that you had to share. And as I grew up at various ages and stages, but I knew when I was out of order. My mum, who bless her, went home to be with the Lord a few years ago. And as dementia set in, she had this way of showing me still that she slightly disapproved. And it sort of came out as a growl.

You can laugh, because it was in her own way. And it was, you would say something, and she would just look there and she'd go, you think, yeah, okay, mum. I get the message.

Yeah. Whenever we develop, we want to grow. And I often sense that area of God's wider church sometimes when I hear that growl of disapproval from the Lord. It brings us back to being a loving, caring place where we build and encourage one another. If you've been linked to social media or church news, you'll be all too aware of late that we, down the centuries, the image of God's beautiful bride has been marred in different places and at different times, globally, nationally, internationally, and across this world. And through acts of sinful acts, sexual immorality, deception, lies, radical distancing from the one true gospel, divisions, lack of pastoral care, leadership, integrity, and the list goes on. We can make the list of failures. And in a sea of angry, anti-church blog posts, Twitters and rants, and angst-filled books that seem to sell and sell and be well-read, [16:46] I would like to think this morning of our reading. And to restore that picture that we have, which is God's original picture of his beautiful church, and not to lose sight of that. I want to give you five simple ways that we can push back against this prevailing culture. And yes, we can look far beyond all the issues of the national church, international church, and everything.

But actually, it starts here at home, as my mum used to tell me and my dad. It starts here at home. And that's where it starts. That's where the love flows out of. And that's where it comes. We may not be in a position to influence national and international things, but we can because we start at home. If I can just give you five little things that I picked up this week while I was praying and thinking about that we can maybe show that to a waiting world in our community and to each other, in that sense of love this morning, of restoring not the failure, but the beauty of the bride of Christ in this place. Many of which we're doing already and bless you for this. I give you this as encouragement. Okay? Encouragement. Encouragement. Encouragement. Encouragement. Number one, extend your church the same grace you give yourself. It's so easy, isn't it, to actually find the faults, but then actually forget the grace that we personally have had extended to us in so many ways. You, like me, will know those times which hasn't been your finest hour, as I say. But people extend grace to us, and God's grace comes to us as well. We extend that grace to one another and to the church. The truth is that church, our church, that we go to on Sundays and during the week, will have flaws because we're all human. Some are rather obvious. Some might be slightly embarrassing. But if they, if we are preaching and holding to the gospel, sharing the word, and we have that beautiful sense of community, love, and mission, then that gives the church that sense of grace that people are looking for and love in our community at the moment. They're looking for that message of love and being loved, and they will be drawn to us. Second, be intentional and dependable. Churches depend on us of being the heart of her life and of her community. That is what we're called to be. And without active members, as children of God getting involved regularly, giving their time and energy, the church simply doesn't function in the way in which it should function, which is to share everything we have with the community and bring God's love and care to the community. I would

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argue that every Christian has and will have an active ministry in a local Bible-believing church. If you don't know what that ministry is, ask the Lord this morning, Lord, what do I bring? What can I give? What can I share?
What gifts? Or stir up the gifts in me to do that more and more. I've heard people say, I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. That is true. You can't argue with that. But what are you missing if you don't? What are you missing about being in the heart of a whole group of people that know and love you and want to encourage you and empower you and sustain, and you bring your gifts?
You know, here is what can make our church function at an optimum level, faithfulness and dependability to share the love of Christ with the people that we know. We go out from here empowered, enthused, excited in the week to come to share what we have and what we've been given.
[21:01] Here is what makes us feel. If you sign up for a role, take it seriously, as you would your other obligations and do it well. Do it well and do it in love.

You know, you have no idea how precious your gift of faithfulness and gifting brings to the body. And if you're doubting that, tell the evil one where to go. If you're doubting what you bring in your gifting, tell the evil one where to go. Because your gifting is precious to God and to us as a family.
Thirdly, speak well of your church. It's so important, isn't it? I wouldn't go out for a moment and disrespect my parents. It says that in scripture. You know, you don't speak ill of your family.
You know, okay, we might have those moments, but in general, we don't speak ill of other people. And we shouldn't speak ill of our church. You know, we go out and we say, we don't hide things, we don't put it under the mat, but we speak of the good things, the good things that we get. I was so encouraged. There was, I'll embarrass Catherine now, but there was a call that came in. And the person that came back to me said, that's exactly the person I needed to speak to today. Because it was love, and it was caring, and it was understanding. I've heard people who have come here, maybe you've come this morning, and you've had this amazing welcome from somebody who's greeted you with a smile, who's shown you where the coffee is. You know, it is all about that. Speak well of your church.
Do you regularly, you know, do we regularly moan about the church's faults? If we do, we need to put that on the back burner and get our perspective right, to talk about the great things that God is doing. It's so important to speak well, not only of the church, but of your brothers and sisters as well, of all ages, especially when others have taken the step of coming to join us. It takes a whole village to raise a child. I think that's the African term that says, you know, if people are new to a church, the last thing they want to hear at coffee afterwards is saying somebody, well, I didn't like that hymn. We speak well of each other. If we've got things to say, we say it in private. We say it to one another, but we don't disrespect the church in front of other people. Post-positive things on, yeah, post-positive things on social network. I'm not a great one on social network. I don't know how it works. Look at me, what a fossil. But post good things, post good news. People pick that up and want to share that as well and want to be drawn. Say and speak well of the bride of Christ. Four, build intentional relationships in your church. Church is a family. Get to know people. It's not a click. How many deep, satisfying relationships have you had with folks in your church? Maybe you've joined a home group. If you're not part of a home group, think about joining a home group. Be part of a home group.
[24:22] Join a group. Join a group that comes through the week. Come and help on children's groups. If you're musical, come and talk to Julian. Especially if you're technically minded, speak to our amazing tech team as well, who's hidden a road there every week but gets things onto the screen. Thank you so much.

Think about being on a welcome team because that's the way you get to meet people. But be intentional about building relationships. If you go to a wedding, do you know what one of the most joyous parts is? It's not only the service here but I love going to the reception afterwards. You get to meet people. You get to chat people. Use coffee like a reception for the bride of Christ. Get to know people. Treat it as the reception and meet somebody and get to chat to somebody you haven't met before.
That's good. Intentional efforts at fostering community will help the church move forward in a great way. And finally, but not necessarily, give regularly to your church. Yes, we should give out of love. We should give out of love of our heart towards God. And no, you shouldn't give simply because the church needs money. We give because, let's be honest, the church does need money. It takes

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money to keep the lights on. It keeps money to be that place in the centre of community. It gives time and money to go out and share in our community to do the things we need to do. But again, through that, be honest, we need, it's biblical as well. So giving of our time and giving of our money is so important in giving regularly with a good heart to the life of the church. So failure in the church, to sum up, yes, there is failure and there will always be failure. Live with it. Take it to God. And yes, the church in its widest sense has seen times and situations which seem far from the beauty and love of God that the love of God should represent. But we can't, I was going to put in there, I did put in there, this is a big but, but you might have got that wrong. But there is a but. We can't change history, but we can look forward with hope. And we can make a difference in our own setting, and in our own church, and in our community. And that can be represented and fulfilled in you and me in the heart of the local church today. In a moment, our children are going to return.

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