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Some Causes of Failure in the Christian Ministry.

BY THE VENERABLE T. J. MADDEN,

Archdeacon of Liverpool.

FAILURE! Causes of failure! Failure in the Christian ministry! What sad, depressing words are these! Failure, where failure means so much—more than in any other calling in the world. Failure, where the minister of Christ goes forth to his labours crowned with Divine promises of success. Has not the Everlasting God, the Author of eternal redemption, fixed His canon against failure? Can God fail of His purpose? And, if not, can we in any sense use the word “failure” in connection with the ministry of reconciliation? Just because we have this treasure in “earthen vessels,” just because of the frailties of our mortal nature, we have to acknowledge and confess that we have failed in our ministry as the stewards of the mysteries of God. And yet the temptation to many of us is to deny our *personal* responsibility for failure. We blame the parish and the people; we blame circumstances, when we ought to blame ourselves, for our unsuccessful ministry. We need to pray: “Search me, O God, and know my heart”; show me my true, real self; save me from *self-deception*. I know of no more subtle temptation than this—to turn our eyes away from ourselves and to fix them on persons and things without, and so persuade ourselves that if we were only placed in a different parish, with a different class of parishioners, and under less exacting conditions, success would be sure. This attitude of mind may be justified in a few cases; but, at any rate, do not persuade yourself that you are one of these unfortunate brethren—for the end of that way is spiritual despair. That the people we minister to are seldom the cause of our failure is clear from a study of the ministry in the Apostolic Church. There has been no more bitter opponent of the Gospel than the Jew—no more difficult man to convince and convert. The Lord described the religious Jews of His day as “serpents” and “vipers.” Out of this unpromising material the first Christian converts were made.

Study the history once again, and recognize that the victory was with St. Peter, St. Stephen and St. Philip—men of like passions with ourselves—because they were “full of faith and the Holy Ghost.” On the Day of Pentecost, and on the days that followed, there was only “a Man and a Message”; with this result—there were added to the Church *daily* thousands of converts. Look at St. Peter’s sermon, look at any of the sermons recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. They are simple narratives of historical events, leading up to brief summaries of the life of our Lord. You could not describe them as “eloquent,” or “polished,” or even “persuasive” sermons. They were the simple, unaffected utterances of men with a limited vocabulary, and of plain, homely speech. But behind the message was a MAN—baptized with the Holy Ghost. They were powerful sermons, because the messenger was endued with power from on high. Turn to the history of our own times, and what do we see? *Here* is a clergyman placed in a most difficult parish. The church is empty, the parishioners indifferent. He is a man of no special ability, with no great gifts of speech or originality of mind, and yet in a few years that parish becomes a centre of a vast and increasing work for God. The church is crowded, hundreds are converted, and the communicants’ roll is close upon one thousand. *There*, close to him, with almost the same conditions as regards the parish, we find a man, eloquent, able, scholarly, and yet, judging his work (as we can only judge it) by visible results, his ministry has failed. His church is almost empty, the communicants are few, and the parishioners are seemingly uninfluenced by the ministry of their parish church.

What is the explanation? It cannot be in the *circumstances* of the parishes. They are almost similar as regards population and people. We are therefore driven to this solution: that somehow the failure is connected with the ministry of the individual clergyman. Let us face the humiliating fact—the causes of failure lie chiefly in ourselves, and not in the parish or people.

If, then, we are driven to the conclusion that the causes of

failure are chiefly *personal*, let us honestly search them out ; for it is particularly baffling to fail without knowing why we fail.

Amongst the causes of failure in ourselves none is more obvious to others, and more disastrous to our spiritual influence, than *Vanity*. It is a vice to which we are, as clergymen, peculiarly exposed. At an early age we are placed in a prominent position ; our sacred calling makes us respected and welcomed in the homes of all classes ; kind and flattering things are said to us, and we grow vain and conceited. But while vanity may be, primarily, a vice of callow youth, it is not unknown amongst elderly ecclesiastics. It is the most subtle of sins, and assumes different forms in different individuals—self-love, self-conceit, self-assertion, self-glorification, a love of display, a spirit of boasting, arrogance, and, especially, intellectual arrogance. The vain man loves the praise of men, and to them he magnifies his work and his personality.

Another fruitful cause of failure is our *Inconsistencies*. The godless and the indifferent are ever on the watch for inconsistency in Christians. They find a grim satisfaction in pointing out to their fellows the inconsistencies of the clergy, and we all know how often a good man's ministry has suffered because he has not been scrupulously exact in his language, or paid his debts punctually, or ruled his own household in righteousness. How often has a hasty temper, a biting word, an ambitious spirit, a grasping love of money, a proud and haughty manner, caused the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme ! These things are noted and talked of at many a fireside, to the detriment of our influence and usefulness. It is more than sad when men give the lie by their lives to the solemn utterances of the pulpit.

There is need, then, that we should examine ourselves for faults of temper, faults of tongue, and faults of manner, lest we do despite to the Spirit of truth and holiness, the gift of God to us at our Ordination. It is the holy, consistent life of the clergyman that bears testimony to the power of the Gospel, and thereby wins others to accept that same saving evangel.

And a third cause of failure is our *Conformity to the World*, and the use of worldly methods to further the work of the Church

in our parishes. That is *the* temptation of our day. We have bazaars, whist-drives, parish dances, and private theatricals, in order to raise money for spiritual purposes. Can we think for one moment that, if we are doing God's work in God's way, He will leave us without the means to it? And have we ever raised money for God's work by questionable methods without our conscience condemning us? We have need again and again to admonish ourselves and to warn our people not to be conformed to this world. If the Spirit of Christ dwell in us, if we have in deed and truth renounced the world, we may be sure of this—God will use us for His glory. But if we truckle to the world ourselves, or drag the world and the things of the world into the work of God in the parish, there will undoubtedly be failure, and continued failure. What we all want to realize is this—that we did verily and in truth receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of the ministry, and that spiritual work can best be done by spiritual men, through spiritual means.

If the sin of worldliness attacks the city parson to the undermining of his spirituality and the degradation of his sacred ministry, the country clergyman suffers from the creeping paralysis of *Sloth*.

Indolence of body and mind and spirit lie at the bottom of the failure of many a country ministry. The people are few and oftentimes uninteresting. We can get round the parish comfortably once a month. After a very few years the monotony of it all crushes the spirit, and the work grows stale and dull, and enthusiasm dies. Then we become that contemptible creature, "a lazy minister." But is this the sin only of the country rector? Do we not know something of this disease—this paralyzing curse—even in our city ministry? The regular visiting of parishioners and of the parish schools, the morning in the study, the daily hour with God and His Word, are things of the past with not a few of us.

"God harden me against myself,
This coward with pathetic voice;
That craves for ease and rest and joy—
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go."

A further reason why we fail is our *Lack of Faith*—faith in God to use us for His own ends and purposes. The Church is His Church, the work His work. “All souls are Mine, saith the Lord.” The Almighty has called us and sent us forth with this commission: “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.”

Why, then, should it be accounted a strange thing with us to have conversions frequently, as the result of the delivery of His message of love and reconciliation? Do we believe in God the Father *Almighty*, Who is mighty to save? Do we go forth to the sick chamber, to the cottage meeting, to the House of God, in the expectation that we shall be used of God, and that God will speak through us? As we stand paralyzed before the world’s devilry, we hear the reproachful words of our glorified Lord: “O ye of little faith, bring him hither *to Me*.”

The Churches now seem to put their faith in choirs, and clubs, and guilds; in armies, and societies, and services—all useful and necessary in their way. We hear so much of man and his machinery for saving souls, of *my* parish, and *my* organizations, and *my* schemes, and *my* plans, of “this great Babylon which I have built,” that it is little wonder God sometimes drives us forth with the dread sentence: “The kingdom has departed from thee”; because we give not the glory to God, because we have not faith in God our Saviour. Here I would stop to add a word of warning; not only must we have faith in God, but there must be strict and instantaneous obedience to the directing voice of God. When we hear the command, “Go near, and join thyself to this chariot,” there must be no arguing, no excuses, no quibbling with God the Holy Ghost. Here lies the path of success. Obey at once, and thus show your implicit faith and confidence, and many a sinner will go on his way rejoicing when you have preached unto him Jesus. The man who wishes not to fail must not only be *called* of God, but he must be both God-possessed and God-directed.

But amongst the personal causes of failure I know of none more fatal to a true spiritual ministry than *Professionalism*.

Professionalism is but the outward and visible sign of the

decay of the inward and spiritual life of the man. Whence this decay, deadness and formality, where all was once life and light in the Lord? It is often through neglected private and personal communion with the Source of all our spirituality. Probably there is nothing which so humbles us to the very dust as the thought of our private devotions. The best of us stand condemned when we think of our hurried, formal, faithless prayers. And formal private prayers react upon the services of the Sanctuary. The public prayers are read perfunctorily—without what our fathers called “unction.” We fail to lift the hearts of our people into the presence of God, because our own hearts are not there.

I have been reading during the last month the memoirs of Bishop Wilkinson and also a volume of his sermons, “The Invisible Glory.” The sermons, as you read them in cold type, are most disappointing. You wonder wherein lay their power, for these same sermons lifted many worshippers in St. Peter’s, Eaton Square, to a higher and holier plane of spiritual experience. The secret is revealed in the story of his life. The sermons were saturated with the prayers of the good Bishop. He lived, he thought, he preached, in an atmosphere of prayer. I do not think there is a new idea in the whole volume of sermons (that is a comfort for some of us); but those who heard them preached experienced a Divine power in each message, unto the salvation and edification of their souls. It is a secret we can all learn—that the one irresistible power in our ministry, in our preaching, is the power of prayer—prayer in the Holy Ghost.

“Why, therefore, should we do ourselves this wrong,
 Or others, that we are not always strong,
 That we are ever overborne with care,
 That we should ever weak or heartless be,
 Anxious or troubled, when with *us* is *prayer*,
 And joy and strength and courage are with *Thee*?”

But all real prayer carries with it *meditation*; the quiet waiting upon God, sitting still in His presence, until our soul, our whole inner being, is bathed in the Sublime—until we become partakers of the Divine nature. Meditation is the soul getting in tune

with the Infinite. In all personal religion there is the element of mysticism—of the true mysticism—of the soul silent and still before God. In this age of hurry and noise, of many meetings and engagements, we are losing this edifying gift. Our meditations ought to be orderly, ought to be connected with the great facts and the great truths of the sacred Scriptures. We must meditate kneeling upon our knees ; meditate, too, with the Holy Book in our hands ; meditate, as Phillips Brooks meditated, with pen and paper ready to record the whisperings of God to his inmost spirit. “For spirit with spirit can meet,” and God reveals His secrets to those that love and fear Him. And it is by this “sitting at His feet” we become like Him in character. Do we want to be holy men of God? Then let us meditate upon God’s holiness, and never forget, “We are as holy as we truly *will* to be holy,” and our hearty desire to be holy will keep us ever learning of Him who is the Holy One of God. Professionalism will wither and perish when the soul is filled with all the fulness of God, and that fulness is ours through prayer and meditation. These will cost time, will mean the ordering of our day into hours set apart for prayer, and work, and sermon preparation. We must steadfastly remember that our engagements with God are more important than those with men ; and we must keep them faithfully, or fail in our ministry.

What we want in these busy days is courage to say “no,” when to grow in grace, to become conformed to His image, is more important than to address meetings of all sorts and descriptions, and to undertake all kinds and varieties of work. Remember this : our people, as a whole, will only rise as high in their spiritual life, and no higher, than we ourselves. Not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of those over whom we are placed by God, we should be much in the presence of God. Even the *servicing of tables*, which one hears so much of, and which is too frequently a parrot cry, need not hinder us—any more than it hindered Stephen—from being full of faith and power. And all saw his face “as it had been the face of an angel.” Truly he must have turned that face more frequently to God than to men.

We have dealt with the causes of failure in the messenger, let us now consider the cause of failure in the MESSAGE. Of course if the messenger is in full fellowship and communion with the Holy Ghost, his message will be in the power and demonstration of the Spirit. We have need to take heed both to ourselves and to the doctrine—*ῥηρῶν του λογον*, should be the preacher's motto.

What about *our own* preaching? Is it the faithful setting forth of the whole counsel of God, on sin, and on sin's eternal penalty, on the Atonement, the vicarious sufferings of Christ, the love of God and the sanctification of believers? Have our sermons strong vitality? Do they hold? Or are they powerless to grip a single soul? Do we apply the Gospel of God to the hearts and consciences of our congregation, rich and poor alike, with all the earnestness of men who believe that their hearers are in danger of the wrath to come? Or have we become hucksters of the Word of the living God? Wherein lay the success of St. Peter and St. Paul as preachers? Not, surely, in any tricks of eloquence or flowers of rhetoric. Think of that insignificant Jew, with some obvious bodily defect, described by himself as "*contemptible* in speech," as well as weak in body. What was the secret of his successful preaching? He himself tells us: "My preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power." This is the secret of the preaching that tells—not physical force nor psychic force, but *spiritual* force.

We want, however, in our preaching, and in all our work, a little more *sympathy* with our people—that Jesus-like feeling of compassion for the multitude. Unless our hearts are touched, even to weeping, when we behold the people, unless our hearts go forth to them in our sermon, their hearts will not respond to the heavenly message.

There is only one way in which we can gain true sympathy with our people. We must be much *amongst* them, in touch with them, rejoicing with those that do rejoice, and weeping with those that weep. What reality there will be then in every sentence we utter from the pulpit! What point will be given to

many a sermon, because we have come not only from the study to the pulpit, but from the *parish* to the pulpit!

When I had completed my paper thus far, I was led to consult six of our Bishops as to what they considered the causes of failure in the Christian ministry. Their own outstanding spirituality (which they would be the last to acknowledge), and their position in the Church of God, give special value to their words. It will suffice if I give the replies of two of them in full—that of my own Bishop and that of the Bishop of Durham. These two cover the replies of the other Bishops.

The Bishop of Liverpool says :

“ I should be inclined to group the causes of failure into three classes—those in ourselves, our methods, and our people :

“ 1. IN OURSELVES.—Neglect of communion with God, professionalism, loss of high ideals, the imperceptible growth of slackness, through familiarity with our work, parish, and people.

“ 2. IN OUR METHODS.—Conservatism, which prevents us from keeping an open mind and adapting ourselves to changing circumstances, habits of thought, and fresh accessions of knowledge.

“ 3. IN OUR PEOPLE.—The growing love of novelty and change, impatience of discipline, dislike of definite doctrine and teaching (especially on such points as the righteousness of God, the obligation of law, the sinfulness of sin, the certainty of judgment on sin), the growing power of worldliness, and love of pleasure.”

The Bishop of Durham writes :

“ 1. I am afraid ‘ failure in the Christian ministry ’ is sadly common, if success is to be at all tested by evident spiritual results—conversions to God, and holy, consistent, unworldly lives, ready to serve others and sacrifice self.

“ 2. In pastoral life generally the chief reasons for failure (let me speak, not as a judge, but as one who knows something of his own failure) seem to me to be—

“(a) The lack of a close, personal ‘ walk with God ’; so that secret communion with Him is either crowded out by hurry or stifled by indolence.

“(b) Forgetfulness of elementary consistencies—in temper, talk, and (to use a vague but convenient word) tone.

“(c) Slackness or self-indulgence in common habits.

“(d) Forgetfulness of the fact that we are to be ‘ examples to the flock.’

“(e) Omission of sympathy with, and respect for, other people. (‘ Honour all men.’)

- “(f) Low ideals as to what we want with men—contentedness with mere ‘good Churchmanship,’ at the best; and, only too often,
 “(g) The use of worldly methods to help what should be spiritual work.

“3. With regard to failure in the pulpit, the main causes seem to me to be—

- “(a) A much too common undervaluing of the holy ordinance of preaching (an undervaluing alike unscriptural and ‘unchurchly’—see the Ordinal).
 “(b) Far too little prayer and pains over preparation (as a result of the undervaluing noticed above).
 “(c) A low state of faith in the power of the Word brought home by the Spirit.
 “(d) ‘Essay’ sermons, ‘clever’ sermons, and suchlike evils.
 “(e) Preaching ‘it’ instead of ‘Him.’ (This is a great cause of failure.)
 “(f) A lack of the indefinable tone of ‘witness’ to truth known by the preacher for himself.
 “(g) The absence of sympathy and respect for hearers; and last, but not least,
 “(h) A markedly frequent reticence about the fulness of the Atoning Sacrifice for present peace, and about the power of the Spirit for ‘victory to-day.’ (These last are the two Divine foci of the Gospel, wonderfully embodied and sealed to faith in the Holy Communion.)”

What is the *conclusion* of the whole matter?

To know the causes of our failures ought to be the first step to remedy them. We need not lie down under the weight of the disabling burden of our failings and our infirmities; yea, of our sins—for they are sins. He who forgave the cowardice of St. Peter, the doubts of St. Thomas, is the same yesterday, to-day and for ever. He walks in the midst of the golden candlesticks. He holds the stars in His right hand, He remembereth that we are but dust, that we have this treasure in earthen vessels. Let us go to Him in penitence, in faith. He is able to do abundantly above all that we can ask or think. If we give ourselves over to Him—“bind the sacrifice with cords even unto the horns of the altar”—He will receive us to empower us afresh with the “anointing” of the Holy Ghost; and failure will be turned into glorious success. “The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”