

## JESUS THE FAILURE

### I

In 1925 one Bruce Barton published a book in the United States called *The Man Nobody Knows*. Its purpose was to show that Jesus was a successful businessman: indeed the most successful of all businessmen. Jesus, the author claimed, was not a ‘Man of Sorrows’, a weakling, or a suffering martyr. He was on the contrary a dynamic leader, a ‘man’s man’ who took twelve ordinary individuals and built a successful corporation that has lasted ever since. He was, like Henry Ford or J. Pierpoint Morgan, a founder of Modern Business.

The view has obvious appeal. Success is a good thing. In Robinson College of all places it would be ungracious, and a slight to the memory of our Founder, to disparage success in business. It would also be hypocrisy. No one gets into a place like this who is not already an outstanding success at school. Many will go on to levitate almost predictably for the next thirty years to the tops of their chosen ladders: to be managing directors, judges, bishops, headmasters, professors, bankers and ministers of state. And most of the rest will be highly successful by the ordinary standards of our time and place: prosperous, creative and respectable. All of this is a thoroughly good thing. Success is the reward conferred by society on those who most advance the common good. No one whose conscience is clear about his or her own conduct ought ever to feel any shame or guilt about getting to the top.

There are some obvious reasons, all the same, for not taking success too seriously. It’s rather bad form — not quite sporting, the English believe — to be too successful, and very boring for other people. Moreover, as we all know, success in life is at least partly a matter of luck. It helps a lot to have good health, to be born in the right part of the world, and to have intelligent, sensible, wealthy and loving parents. More seriously, we need to guard against any worship of success. Bruce Barton’s bizarre book is an example of our constant tendency to create God in our own image. The Englishman, it used to be said, is a self-made man, and he worships his creator. Americans are much the same. The First Commandment is a standing reminder to look at things the right way up. But the most important reason of all lies at the heart of the Christian religion. According to the New Testament Bruce Barton was quite wrong. In the ordinary, worldly sense of the word — in terms of wealth, power and popularity — Jesus was not a success. He was a complete failure.

### II

Jesus was *Messiah*, the ‘King of the Jews’. The nearest parallel today would be with the Ayatollah Khomeini. His followers believed he would lead a ‘national liberation army’ to drive out the hated imperialists, restore the ancient kingdom and its holy religion, purify society of its foreign corruption, punish traitors and collaborators, and inaugurate a

golden age of justice, freedom and peace. According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus was descended from King David. Mysterious oriental wizards came to worship the King of the Jews. The ancient holy-man Simeon beheld in the infant Jesus 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel'. Vast crowds followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem, hanging on his words, waiting eagerly for the revolution, trying to make him king by force. James and John pleaded to be set on his right and his left hand when he entered his kingdom. Jesus acted out the prophecy of Zechariah when he rode into Jerusalem 'upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass'; the screaming, delirious mob yelled out 'Hosanna to the Son of David'; in a symbolic act of liberation and kingship Jesus took possession of the sacred Temple, drove out the foreigners and taught the people.

Five days later it was all over. Jesus was a prisoner of the Imperial garrison. His own people had plotted to have him arrested and charged with sedition. The cheering crowds melted away. One of his closest friends betrayed him and the rest deserted, lying to save their skins. His execution by the occupying power was an act of propaganda calculated to insult and humiliate the entire Jewish people. Dressed in a parody of Imperial regalia to make sport for the soldiers; put to death by a method reserved for slaves; advertised as 'King of the Jews' in all three official languages.

There was no more talk of 'national liberation' for quite some time. A generation later the Romans stamped out a much bigger attempt. About a hundred years after Jesus the Nazarene they wrote off Judaea altogether. Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed and a furrow ploughed through the ruins. All survivors were deported and Jews banished from Palestine for ever. Viewed from the standpoint of his own disciples in his own day, it is difficult to imagine a more comprehensive failure than that of the short-lived Jesus movement.

### III

The failure of Jesus is the second most important thing about the Christian religion. We need to be assured on the highest authority that all human life is a failure. Of course we already know this but we are often tempted to regard our own case as exceptional, and to make allowances for other peoples'.

All our conventional successes come to seem rather trivial and often they turn sour. We get to the top of one mountain and see others much higher all around. Sometimes we buy success in our work at the cost of failure in our private lives. It is almost a law of nature that the statesman or millionaire or Olympic medallist or Nobel prize-winner should be at odds with his wife and children, at high risk in his mental and physical health, morally confused and with a chaotic and unsatisfactory sex-life. And all too many people, of course, have few if any conventional successes with which to hide their failures: are bankrupt, unemployed, or locked into futile and dead-end jobs; diseased or crippled; victims or perpetrators of crime; alcoholics, drug-addicts and sexually confused; too poor to pay for rent and food, too ignorant to find their way out of their difficulties, too weak or stupid to follow it. And underneath it all, every Christian knows, is the daily and hourly defeat of the spirit: good resolutions and the fruit of repentance

swept away by the first breath of temptation. We may put a good face on it and be envied, even admired by others. But sometimes it feels as though our entire lives are a desperate stumbling from one spiritual disaster to another.

Romantics have often tried to redeem our private failures by public success. If only we can get our ‘social structures’ right — in some versions, if only we can get rid of ‘social structures’ altogether — then all will be well. *Madame la Guillotine*, the great Reform Act or the Welfare State; Independence from Britain or the U.S.A., ‘de-colonisation’; Worker’s Revolution and the liquidation of all class enemies: all we have to do is give one big push now and roll in the New Order. Then we shall have an end of poverty, injustice, oppression and most other evils. I have actually heard a Marxist argue that cancer is caused by capitalism.

We all know that politics of this kind is a collective neurosis. It is no accident that the failure of Jesus was a *political* failure which acutely exposes the delusions of all who pretend that we can change society without changing human nature. For human nature is the problem. Jesus the failure is a sign of the Incarnation. At Christmas time we call him ‘Emmanuel’, which means ‘God with us’. If God were really with us, if He ‘took our nature upon Him’ and became Man, then of course He would fail just like the rest of us.

#### IV

We must be very clear about why the failure of Jesus is such an important part of the Christian gospel. ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’, and failure looks like bad news. The point is simply this. We don’t really belong here at all. The fact that we are so continually aware of our failure is proof. We judge ourselves and our society by the higher standards of another place. In the words of our second reading, from the Epistle to the Hebrews, we ‘desire a better country, that is, an heavenly’. Not because we are saints like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not even because we are Christians, but merely *because we are human beings* we go on expecting the impossible, hoping the hopeless, measuring all our achievement against perfection and seeing it fall short.

No other creature is remotely like this. It makes no sense to think of a discontented snail or jelly fish. Even the highest brutes — apes, dogs, swine, cattle — can have no sense of failure as we know it. But we have been made ‘in the image and likeness of God’, and so we feel a ‘divine discontent’ at the strictly limited possibilities of earthly existence. Instead of tamely submitting to our imprisonment in this universe of space and time we bang our heads against the wall and scream to be let out. But we never can be in this life. And that, as Leibniz saw, is the final cause of evil, tragedy and human failure.

So we realize the paradox: it is precisely in our failure, a failure Jesus fully shared, that we know for certain there is more to human life than this life can ever contain. And that is the meaning of the Resurrection. The second most important part of the gospel, I said, is the failure of Jesus. But most important of all is the Resurrection of Christ. For in the Resurrection we see human nature shattering the eggshell, breaking out of this prison of finitude and causality into a new life above and beyond all failure.

At the outset of Lent it is proper that we should think more of the suffering and humiliation of our Lord as he shared in the failure of our lives, than of his victory. But every Sunday is an Easter, and we only make sense of what we know in the light of the Resurrection. 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit' said the Preacher: human hopes are doomed and our successes turn to dust and ashes. But the Resurrection validates our hopes and gives meaning to all our failures.

And so we carry on, though body, mind and spirit for ever betray us. We honour those who seem to be successful, for their achievements are at least a hint of human fulfilment. We do what we can to relieve the misery of those who have been denied the possibility of any success. And we turn again to the thankless task of social reform, not because we put our trust in politics, but as part of our vocation in this life to attempt the impossible in light of the Resurrection faith.

For 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'. By faith, says the Epistle, Abraham 'looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God'; and so do we, in union with Jesus the failure, who by his death and resurrection was made Christ the King:  
to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honour and glory,  
now and for ever.  
Amen.

One in a series of Lenten addresses on Jesus by College Fellows.

Chapel of Robinson College, Cambridge  
Sunday, 1 March 1987