WHEN THINGS GO WRONG[1]

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, 11 August 2026

If I tell you that this sermon is called "When things go wrong", you might groan with the weight that immediately descends on you. You might prefer me to have a sermon called "When things go right"; at least the list will be shorter and the weight lifted. Sorry! This morning's lectionary won't let me, although this could be a handy excuse for an inherently pessimistic preacher, which, I hope, I am not. So, why this title?

Let's start with the Exodus reading. Moses is on the mountain receiving the two tablets of stone engraved by the hand of God. He was away for forty days and forty nights.[2] After some time, the Hebrew people become restive; what has happened to Moses? They approached Aaron, Moses's brother, who had been left in charge. It seems that their "approach" was less than gentle because Aaron thought it necessary to act. Later in the chapter we read, they are described as "running wild".[3]

Aaron instructs them to collect whatever gold they have, and he casts the image of a calf. The next day, Aaron proposes to hold a "festival to the Lord", using their newly minted idol.[4] When this happens, God sends Moses back post haste. On arrival, he is so disgusted that he casts down the stones and they break. What's the problem here?

Our first impression might be that the people had invented a new god for themselves. We would be wrong. What they did was to represent the God they already worshipped by an image. [5] In the absence of Moses, they were looking for leadership, for reassurance. A material image might bring what they wanted, something concrete. The problem with representing their God by an image was that it localised their universal deity. Israel was related to that deity by the terms of their agreement, the covenant; that God did not depend on any location. One of the terms of the covenant specifically forbad such localising representations.

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[1] Readings: Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 20-24; Philippians 4; Matthew 22:1-14
[2] Exodus 24:18
[3] Exodus 32:25
[4] Exodus → The Golden Calf – Study Guide - Yale Bible Study
[5] Exodus 32:19

That is why it was appropriate for Moses to break the original tablets, the text of the contract. That's what went wrong.

Our reading from Philippians introduces us to Euodia and Syntyche, two important women leaders of the church in that city. One commentator speculates about their status, suggesting that they might have been the equivalent of deacons or even bishops in the terminology that Paul uses.[6] Apparently, they had had a disagreement, and Paul urges them to be "of the same mind". We may assume that internal dissension lay behind the writing of the letter, in which Paul earlier says to the whole community:

> … make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of full accord and of one mind.[7]

It is easy to assume that the two women were the cause of the internal dissensions in Philippi; that what happened was their fault. It is also possible to conclude that they were the principal proponents of differing viewpoints arising from internal issues, possibly about finance; that is, that the dissension was not their fault. We must be careful not to label them as "troublesome women"; their example is far from negative, being Paul's "co-workers".[8] Possibly, Epaphroditus, the bearer of the letter, is the one asked to mediate because the issue itself, whatever it was, must be resolved if the same mind of the community is to be restored.

In Matthew we have the parable of the wedding feast, in which everything seems to go wrong. A gentler version of today's parable appears in Luke, but the Matthew version has two features that disturb modern readers. They are the reaction of the king to the refusal of the invited guests to come and the rejection of the guest without the wedding garment. The first feature repels us by its unnecessary and exaggerated violence. After all, having your house burnt down is a bit much for not accepting an invitation to a wedding. We must all be pleased that it hasn't taken on generally! The second feature offends us by being unfair. If you are dragged into the feast from the street, how can you be expected to have your best clothes on? These features should not be taken at face value; they are literary devices designed to highlight the importance of the story.

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[6] George Hunsinger, *Philippians (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)*, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2020, p. 31

[7] Philippians 2:2

[8] Constructing Euodia and Syntyche - CBE International

The violent reaction of the king to the refusal of his invited guests to come to the banquet is partly accounted for by Matthew's choice of the identity of the host. To refuse an invitation to the wedding of the king's son amounts to high treason. In this way Matthew heightens the importance of the invitation and makes it impossible for his readers to escape the clear point of the parable. This is a parable about the invitation to join the kingdom of God. Refuse the invitation and you are in deep trouble. But it also includes a reference to the fall of the city of Jerusalem to the Emperor Titus in 70 AD. Matthew's gospel was probably written around the year 80 AD when the memory of this event was still very fresh in the minds of the Jewish Christians for whom Matthew was writing.[9]

What about the poorly clad guest? Some scholars suggest that it was customary to give wedding attire to the guests as they entered the feast, so the person who failed to put it on was both ungrateful and dishonoured the occasion, their host, and his son. Others regard this part of the story as a separate parable that was inserted here to highlight a problem experienced by the early church. Paul notes that some of the baptised, who regarded themselves as free from the Jewish law, also thought themselves free from any moral law.[10] The warning is subtly conveyed by the reproachful use of the word 'friend' with which the king addresses his guest. It evokes the idea of one who should have been faithful but was not. This is a parable about responsiveness and about responsibility.

Andrew McGowan suggests that this parable

> says in form what it says also in content: do not assume you already know what the challenge will be, because it may change. You may not know what God demands of you, let alone that you have fulfilled it, any more than you know what this parable is about or how it ends. The reign of heaven is like an invitation, like a banquet, like a command, and always a mystery.[11]

What then, if things go wrong? Michael Jensen suggests that we need to return to our Philippians reading[12]:

> Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any

[9] see Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1986, p. 125.
[10] J Jeremais, *Rediscovering the Parables*, London, Macmillan, 1966, p. 53. Romans 3.8; 6.1; Jude 4.
[11] (11) Invitation to a Wedding - by Andrew McGowan
[12] Think on these things - by Michael Jensen

excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things…

Paul goes on to remind the Philippians of the many times when things went wrong for him, saying that he could "do all things through him who strengthens" him. That might have helped the frustrated Hebrews; it might have helped Euodia, Syntyche and the Philippians; and it might have helped the wedding invitees and the unprepared wedding guest. It could also help us.

Last Friday marked the 43rd anniversary of my first sermon here in St James'. In some sense, all sermons are the same, while being completely different. That's my experience and I hope that it is yours when you hear them. In fact, there's only one message, in bad times or in good, as Talitha Fraser tells us in her poem:

Let love be law
Did you see the news today?
Law failed love.
Let love be law.

Did you see the news today?
Hospitality failed love.
Let love be hospitality.

Did you see the news today?
Justice failed love.
Let love be justice.

Did you see?[13]

[13] Talitha Fraser, Let love be law", *Eureka Street*, Vol 27 No 23, https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=54359&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Tuesday%2028%20November%202017&utm_content=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Tuesday%2028%20November%202017+CID_6ea08e812406b70b82d029186533f44e&utm_source=Jescom%20Newsletters&utm_term=READ%20MORE

The Adoration of the Golden Calf (1663)
Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)
National Gallery, London

Ruins of a church at Philippi, dated 550 AD

The Wedding Banquet
Matthäus Merian the elder, etching from *Icones Biblicae,* published in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, c. 1625-1630.