

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 4th February 2018
Mark 1: 29 - 39; 1 Cor 9: 16 - 23

In 1990, 27 years ago, a 24-year old doctor started his first job in medicine. In his first month he was attending to a 16-year old boy undergoing chemotherapy. The boy needed two different injections, one injection into a vein, and a second into the spine.

The intravenous drug, the one meant for the vein, was highly toxic – indeed fatal - if it was administered into the spine. But, that drug arrived on the ward in a syringe that was nearly identical to syringe of the other injection. When the young doctor came to administer the spine procedure, both syringes were handed to him. He proceeded to inject both drugs into the patient's spine.

As soon as the doctor realised what had happened, frantic efforts were made to flush out the toxic drug from the boy's spine. But, it was to no avail and tragically the boy died a week later.

You might think the most important priority would be to learn from what went wrong and make sure the mistake, which the doctor made, was never repeated. But, instead the doctor was prosecuted and convicted for manslaughter. He and a colleague were given suspended jail terms.

While everyone was fixated in apportioning blame and of convicting the doctor of a crime instead of finding out what went wrong and fixing the problem to make sure it never happened again, exactly the same error did happen again in another hospital, and another patient died.

This story has become a textbook example of what is known as a blame culture that can develop in organisations, in this case the NHS. The then UK Health Secretary used this example in a speech in 2016 to illustrate the challenges facing not just the NHS, but health care across the world¹. Across the world 1 million patients die in hospitals because of avoidable clinical mistakes, many because health care systems are more interested in blaming than learning.

But, can *all* avoidable mistakes really *all* be avoided? Yes, they can.

Take, for example, the tragic story of United Airlines flight 173, on which 10 people died when that aeroplane crashed in December 1978. The plane crashed because the pilot was trying to rectify a problem with the landing gear, but failed to notice that the plane was low on fuel. When he was forced to crash land the plane, he did so with extraordinary skill saving the lives of over 150 passengers. But because of his mistake – not noticing the low fuel level - 10 people died, and the pilot was subsequently tied up in a 7-year long court case, came close to suicide, lost his pilot's licence, and ultimately died a broken man.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/from-a-blame-culture-to-a-learning-culture>

But, that plane crash became the moment the airline industry realised that if it was going to reduce airline fatalities, it needed to change its culture. The industry realised that 'human factors', rather than technical or equipment failure had been at the heart of the problem. Anyone could have failed to notice low fuel levels when they were trying to fix the landing gear.

As a result the airlines transformed their training programmes. Pilots had to attend group sessions with engineers and attendants to discuss communication, teamwork and workload management. Captains were required to encourage feedback, and crewmembers were required to speak up boldly. The industry moved from a blame culture to what it called a learning culture.

The result? There were dramatic - and immediate - reductions in the number of airline fatalities. The number of deaths overall halved over 30 years - at the same time as air travel increased nine fold. 10 people died in 1978 on the United Airlines 173 when it crashed, but last year, in 2017, there were absolutely no deaths due to crashes on commercial passenger jets². On passenger jets last year very single avoidable death was avoided; every single one. Doesn't that sound like a miracle?

Blame cultures encourage people to avoid responsibility, to try to evade justice, and to keep making the same mistake. They also cause heartbreak for everyone involved and condemn people to lives of exclusion from work, from society, even from life itself.

Learning cultures on the other hand seek to fix what has gone wrong, to mend what has been broken, to heal in a way that ensures the problem, the thing that is broken, that is sick does not define the nature of the industry, the society, or the person.

The airline industry realised that it needed to change its culture in 1978. Health Care across the world is only now in the 21st century realising that it too needs to change its culture. It is a shame that it has taken so long for both of these sectors to make the changes that need to be made, for those changes were first introduced by Jesus into his society two thousand years ago.

In Jesus' time and place a culture of blame was everywhere and it affected everyone. Not only were you to blame if you broke a religious law, and punished for it, but if it looked like you were being punished for something then the assumption was that you must be to blame for something that you had done wrong. The consequence that followed was often social exclusion.

If you suffered from a chronic illness, rather than recognising that you needed help to overcome a frailty inherent in the human condition, it was assumed that you were being punished for something that you were to blame for; and you were excluded from polite society. If you worked for the Romans as a tax collector, for

² <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-aviation-safety/2017-safest-year-on-record-for-commercial-passenger-air-travel-groups-idUKKBN1EQ17F>

example, rather than recognising that you needed help to liberate yourself from the oppressive power of an occupying army, the assumption was that you were to blame for not being able to resist the worldwide domineering Roman Empire.

God, people were taught, was a God of judgement. Step out of line, and you would be judged; much like many blame cultures today where if you make a mistake then you are blamed and prosecuted.

Back in Jesus' day this blame culture was universal. You can tell that it was universal because when Jesus instituted a culture of healing and teaching in opposition to the prevailing blame culture, the Gospel writer Mark says, "That evening they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by devils; and the whole town was there, gathered at the door."³ *The whole town was there.*

Mark's Gospel, which we read from this morning is the earliest of the Gospels, and right at the very beginning of it Jesus, who has just been baptised as the Son of God, comes to the people, teaching and healing; not blaming and judging, but teaching and healing. Indeed, he even comes casting out demons, those voices in people's heads that replay constantly the accusing voice of judgement and blame. Not only were people socially pushed to the margins of society if they suffered, but psychologically in their own heads their characters were pushed to the very margins of their being because they were blamed for who they were and what had befallen them in life.

Jesus started to tell and show people that God is not a God of judgement, but a God of love who wants people to learn from what happens to them in life rather than blamed for what happens to them. When Jesus started to do this, when he started to heal, forgive, touch and love people, they started to get better. They started to get better dramatically and immediately, in the same way as people stopped dying dramatically and immediately when the airline industry changed its culture in 1978.

Much like the zero number of deaths following commercial jet accidents last year feels like a miracle, so in Jesus day the astonishing turn around in people's well being when they were told that God loved them instead of blamed them felt miraculous.

In our lives, I bet many people here this morning have known blame cultures in the places where they have worked. But, I want to ask you not about the culture of your work place, but the culture of the family home. What kind of culture do you have in your home?

The Sacrament of Baptism is a ritual that puts at its heart the transformation of our culture from one that blames to one that loves. When we baptised Finlay this morning we told him that he was loved, even though he is a human being born into a human society. He will make mistakes and do things wrong, as all human beings do. There will be ways by which our all too human society will let him down

³ Mark 1: 33

in the years to come. But, when we baptised Finaly we promised to love him and to teach him in ways that will help him to overcome the mistakes he will make in his life, and to overcome the mistakes that will be made by others to him in his life.

In due time he will have to take responsibility for his life, and if he does wrong he will have to face justice. But, in baptism his parents Eva and Craig, and we as a congregation, as friends as family promise what promise in respect of all people - that we will not look upon others as people who should be blamed for the frailties of the human condition that affect us all, but instead we promise to teach others, and ourselves how the consequences of these frailties can be overcome, mitigated, avoided if our attitude towards people is one of loving and learning rather than judging and blaming.