

David Greenwood reflects

Recently, the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, gave an interview in which he accepted the criticism that the government often seemed to have adopted a wasteful “scattergun” approach to the COVID19 pandemic, appearing to over-promise, trying things that proved not to work as well as hoped, wasting resources and political and social capital in the process.

But he contended that this approach had also produced results which might not otherwise have been achieved. He defended the adoption of stretched targets, calling them “big hairy audacious goals”. He said that “you set a big goal and use that to galvanise the system to make it happen.” Allied to this, he said that backing a lot of horses had resulted in some hiccups but the approach had been vindicated by results. The key thing was not to worry about reputational risk. “In the public sector, all too often, the attitude is, if we don’t know it’s going to work for sure, we shouldn’t do it because it might not work – and wouldn’t that be embarrassing?”

In other words, the government has deliberately set the bar high and tried to banish fear of failure, because the situation demands it. It was this approach, Hancock maintains, that within a few months moved the UK from a very low level of testing to a position where more people per head are being tested than almost any other country. It has also set ambitious targets for vaccination, with the aim of covering all over 70s by March and all over 50s by end-April. We shall await the outcome but the decision to aim high is conscious and explicit government policy, which says that bumps in the road are to be expected and are to be overcome by keeping one’s eyes on the prize.

Some of this, of course, may be political spin but that is beside the point. The interesting thing is what it might say to us. The Bible teems with exhortations to strive and put fear behind us. As Christians, we are set what sometimes feel like unattainable goals or impossible standards. But, as Jesus said, all things are possible with God. Paul wrote about fighting the good fight, running a race and winning a prize, “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

For Christians, fear of failure and possible embarrassment is an irrelevant indulgence. There are always bumps in the road, but we are here to follow Jesus Christ, to fall down and to pick ourselves up and try again. The task may seem absurdly difficult at times but as Paul also wrote: “The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

Covid19 is the biggest challenge many of us have ever experienced, but by achieving tough targets and putting fear to one side it will be seen off. In the same way, we Christians are galvanised by the challenges before us and are shielded from fear of failure by the example of Jesus Christ.

“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. When we are afraid of failing again, we are not straining ahead.”
Philippians 3:13-14

