

Some family names just reek of celebrity. Turn to the Churchill section in *Who's Who* and you'll be there for hours: look for Beckham in the magazine racks and you'll be there for days. Even without such giddy heights of stature, many clans achieve a degree of regional status: each locale is replete with minor dynasties of local fame or, round here at least, notoriety.

If you Google my family name- and I wouldn't recommend you do unless you are seriously in need of something to do and a life to do it in- you will discover that Dame Fame has largely kept her distance from the Fenby family. Even in this celebrity obsessed age when I should be grasping at any scrap of reflected glory this is a bit of a relief. If you searched the internet you might find mention of Jonathan Fenby, a journalist on the *South China Morning Post* and more recently author- we're hardly talking the same level there as a surname like Austen or Dickens. Minor league stuff. There will be in your search (handy for diverting the curious away from my past) someone who shares my first name as well as my last, though, as he is a professional rugby player, that's about all we have in common. You will almost certainly, in your searches, run across Eric Fenby who is mildly famous in musical circles for being the composer Delius' hands and eyes when the syphilis impeded his functioning too much; and notorious within his family for his belief that his family were after his money, which we weren't, and we all knew he didn't have any *anyway*. Musicians never do. So slight fame in the music world, but it's hardly a name like Mozart or Haydn that the whole world sings.

If one could become famous for prodigious tea drinking, smoking too much and an incomparable depth of knowledge of swear words then the halls of fame would indeed have an incontestably large section of Fenbys in it. But you can't so Eric Fenby is about it in the fame stakes. About it.

You have to look a bit harder, but success will be yours, paradoxically enough, if you rifle through the pages of this 1970s publishing sensation Stephen Pile's *Book of Heroic Failures*. Even then, fittingly enough perhaps, if you read the book you wouldn't know the relevant entry was one of the clan. Denying us even this bit of the limelight they managed to print the name wrong as Senby.

Great Uncle Harold- now sadly departed- was briefly a minor celebrity in Leeds in the late seventies. He even found himself interviewed on *BBC Look North*. I did say minor. Anyway, he was famous for being the man who had worn his hearing aid in the wrong ear for 20 years. Perhaps I should clarify: his hearing aid was fitted in the

wrong ear for twenty years. He may have been Yorkshire born and Yorkshire bred and thus as the immortal rhyme goes strong in the arm and thick in the head, but he wasn't quite as daft as to put it in the wrong ear himself. The doctors did that. He did always think he could hear better without it in.

The things people will do for their fifteen minutes of fame.

But anyway, let us turn our attention away from family to a better known, more famous group of heroic failures, the disciples of Jesus. You couldn't find a more motley crew of no-good, no-win, lo-brain, no-hopers than that lot.

The flotsam and jetsam of Judean society had collected round Jesus like debris round a rock in a stream: country oiks, petty criminals and prostitutes, hot-heads and religious fanatics- all the people you wouldn't want gatecrashing your garden party, they all tagged along. This background does not of course set them up or mark them out for failure: far from it. They followed Jesus, so what came before is when you get down to it, not important. It's what came after.

Could they stay awake one hour? No. Did they really understand a word of what he said? No. Did they stay by his side through thick and thin, right to the bitterest of ends? No.

Did they get it wrong again and again? Yes. Did they run away at the very moment they were needed most? Yes. Did they betray him, deny him, abandon him? Oh yes.

By any standards that makes this raggle taggle gaggle of men and women abject failures. And not terribly heroic ones at that.

In each of the Easter season Gospels when we meet the disciples, we interrupt them still failing; whether it's hiding in the upper room or going back to the day job fishing on the lake, or most poignantly trekking back to the backwater from whence they came, trudging wearily back to the insignificant village of Emmaus after their little world imploded in yet another failure on Good Friday. They were still nattering on about what has happened when they are joined on the road by a stranger, an especially ill-informed one so it seems, as they have to explain to him- a tad tetchily it would appear- what has been happening in Jerusalem these past two days. And then something rather strange happens. The outsider scolds them for their foolishness and systematically explains all that has happened to them and to Jesus in the light of the scriptures. He joins them, breaks the bread and is gone.

That was a moment of scorching revelation, a moment of the truest epiphany. It turns out that the disciples have been wearing their hearing aids in the wrong ear all these years. They had thought they had been hearing the muffled shouts of rebellion and revolution, the rallying call to free Israel from the imperial yoke. What they had actually been listening to was something incomparably more important: the Word himself made flesh. And all of a sudden it was all so clear, so obvious. All that enigmatic teaching, all that weird stuff about the Son of Man, all the confusion of the last week, all suddenly understood with brilliant clarity. With the word explained and bread broken, the resurrection life came to life.

So the two disciples who had been bound for Emmaus ran back to Jerusalem back to the eleven, and out of our story. We don't know anything about the future lives of Cleopas and his companion, the part they played in the heroic days of the early Church, whether they had many missionary journeys or just the one. Surprisingly not even subsequent pious myth- which hates a legendary vacuum even more than nature abhors a physical one- not even that has filled in the gaps. But of one thing we can be certain. Cleopas and his anonymous companion- like the eleven, like St Peter, St Paul, St James, St John, St Mary Magdalene, like all the apostles, all the disciples, all the prophets, patriarchs and saints: like all who love God, they remained failures in the eyes of the world.

And here we are in Church on this Sunday morning, failures each and every one. No matter how successful we might be in our chosen or given fields, no matter how many prizes or plaudits we may obtain, no matter how well educated or hard working, socially-esteemed or financially secure, we are failures. In a world which values consumption more than compassion, profit-making more than kindness, national borders more than shared humanity, winning more than understanding, choice more than mercy: in such a world there is no credit and no kudos to being a disciple of Jesus. In such a world all followers of Christ are summed up by the one word 'failure'. So failures we are. And like Pete and Paul, Mary and Martha, James and John, Cleopas & his pal, what heroes.