

10th April 2026

Imperfections

“We are all perfectly imperfect. That’s what makes us human.”

Ruby Yayra Goka, *Perfectly Imperfect* (2013)

Viewforth Church in Edinburgh, where I ministered in the 1980s and 90s, was built in 1847. On a corner site, it has four levels – a sub-basement with rooms and a small hall, a basement with a kitchen and large hall, a wide sanctuary on the ground floor, just above street level, and an extensive, three-sided gallery. The front of the gallery has an attractive balustrade, a series of about twenty identical carved panels, with a five-petalled flower at the centre of each, the petals of every flower bending backwards.

They are all beautiful, and symmetrical – apart from one. For half-way along the left side of the gallery there’s a panel with a carved flower at the centre with only *four* petals, all bending *forwards*. An apprentice who got it wrong? Bad quality control in the workshop? Perhaps. But I was told that the error was included on purpose, the architect at the time affirming, “It’s to illustrate that there is nothing perfect in human hands. Only God is perfect.” So, it could be a laudable sentiment, a purposeful inclusion, a mistake which was discovered too late for changes to be made, or a clever story made up for the new minister. We shall never know.

But, in truth, I came to appreciate that out-of-kilter carving. For a start, it was at eye level when I was in the pulpit, a reminder that, whatever I thought of my preaching, it would never be perfect. And, from time to time, it suggested the pomposity and self-righteousness of some of the people I worked with, who thought *they* were perfect, but clearly weren’t. And, of course, it was a metaphor for the purpose of worship, recognising the imperfections in all of us, knowing the forgiving love of our God, and seeking ways to improve our service to Christ and the Kingdom.

Ruby Yayra Goka is right. “We are all perfectly imperfect”. It’s what makes us human. Mostly, we blend in (for didn’t the imperfect panel in Viewforth Church’s gallery look pretty much the same as all the others, unless you examined them closely?) And sometimes our imperfections stick out like a sore thumb. But, either way, it’s good to know that the imperfect has as much right to a place in the house of God as all the other carved flowers on the balustrade that appear perfect in every way.

A prayer for today

Loving God, as I recognise my imperfections, help me understand your perfect love. Amen

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