

Making Progress

Luke 10:25-37

7th Sunday after Pentecost

24th July 2011

If you read the sports pages of any of our daily newspapers, you will be well aware of the narrow focus we have here in Canada on certain sports such as hockey, baseball, basketball and football to the exclusion of many others. Because of this there are a large number of unsung Canadians sporting heroes who get very little attention or acclaim.

One of these is a young man from British Columbia called Ryder Hesjedal, our country's top cyclist, who has been performing magnificently these past weeks in the Tour de France. Hesjedal has been the only Canadian good enough to compete in this top sporting event in the past few years. He has been frequently honoured in the cycling world for his many great achievements, being declared the Canadian cyclist of the decade and international cyclist of the year on more than one occasion. But, sadly, outside his sport no-one seems to pay any attention. If he was a hockey player, his photograph would be on every sports page and his name would be on everyone's lips.

Talking about the Tour de France, I am always amazed at the immense athletic prowess of competitors such as Hesjedal because this must be the singular most grueling sporting event in the world. How these cyclists manage to pedal hour after hour up some of the steepest mountain passes in the world without any rest, I do not know. And they do it not just for one day, but day after day for 3 weeks, covering a distance of 2,000 miles. The *New York Times* said that the "Tour de France is arguably the most physiologically demanding of athletic events.' The effort [may be] compared to 'running a marathon several days a week for nearly three weeks', while the total elevation of the climbs [may be] compared to 'climbing three Everests.'"¹

The amazing thing, too, is that the cyclists keep getting better. Their performances over the hundred years of the staging of this event – drugs and doping apart – have increased exponentially. The strength of their muscles, their oxygen absorption, their stamina and endurance have all jumped by leaps and bounds. And it's not only in events such as cycling that this is taking place. Researchers tell us that such improvement are happening right across the wide spectrum of all sporting endeavour.

Dr. Guy C. Brown, a Cambridge biochemist specialising in athletic achievement, says it's obvious there has been an amazing improvement in sporting performance since 1900. And the reasons are obvious too – better training, diet, health care and scientific understanding of fitness among other factors. The record time for the men's 1500 metre run, for example, has

improved by 10 seconds every 25 years with comparable progress in other events.

Women, though, says Brown, are making even greater advances and the gap between men and women in the athletic world is slowly shrinking.² A UCLA study predicts that women will improve dramatically in coming years and they will eventually outrun men by 2035 in endurance events such as the marathon.³

Brown says that it is possible that humans may soon reach the boundaries of physical fitness since the overall limiting factor for athletes is the heart's ability to pump more freshly oxygenated blood through miles of vessels. Then again, he adds, developments such as surgical enhancements, more flexible tendons, faster-acting muscles, higher oxygen absorption and faster blood circulation – all hopefully done in legal and acceptable ways – could lead to a new era where athletic improvement will rise even more dramatically.⁴

It's not only in the field of athletic endeavour, of course, that we can judge the amazing rate of human progress. We need only think of the advances that have been achieved in the fields of science and technology within the last hundred years from the invention of planes to television to computers. And this is not to speak of the huge advances in medicine from vaccinations to insulin to antibiotics to heart bypass surgery and chemotherapy that have improved health and increased life expectancy a hundred-fold.⁵

All things considered then, we residents of Planet Earth have a lot of which to be proud in terms of our modern development and progress. Surely, the world is becoming a better place day by day. Surely, we human beings are becoming more truly formed in the image of God. Surely, it can only be onwards and upwards from here.

Wait a moment, though! What about our progress in other areas of life? That's not so hot, is it? In fact, though we are giants in terms of athleticism, science and medicine, unfortunately we are mere pygmies when it comes to advances in other areas of social and global concern. For instance, we haven't achieved anywhere near the progress we should have in terms of feeding the hungry, tackling poverty, solving the refugee crisis, curbing global warming, establishing justice, promoting human rights. In these areas, in fact, we have been downright delinquent.

Instead of making progress morally and spiritually in the 21st century, on the contrary, we are losing ground. In recent years, people have been turning away from God in droves and declaring him to be dead. Churches have become empty and matters of faith have been demoted

so low on people's scale of priorities that they hardly register any more. Surely, instead of making progress in areas of morality and spirituality – as we are doing so spectacularly in other areas of life – we are not just losing ground, we are going backwards.⁶

Can this trend be reversed? Can human beings still progress to become moral and spiritual giants? The answer, I believe, lies with good and faithful Christians in every country around the globe, ourselves included, as we more truly and effectively infuse the world around us with the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Isn't this the love which we see perfectly reflected in the parable of the Good Samaritan?⁷ After all, this wasn't just a story of one man doing a neighbourly deed for someone in distress. It was a story of a love that crossed the racial divide between Samaritans and Jews that historically had been unbridgeable. It was a story of sacrificial love because the Samaritan himself risked personal injury by stopping in a high crime area. And it was also a story of unconditional love. A love that was willing to love the unlovable without question or judgement. This is the very kind of love that we, as Christians, need to practise today for this is the kind of love that can turn the tide and help our world make positive strides in moral and spiritual development.

But, truthfully speaking, can such love, practised by ordinary people like ourselves, really make a difference?

Dr. William Willimon tells about a group of church women who were looking for a service project that might make a difference in their community of Pine Mountain, Georgia. Someone suggested that they might do something to help at the local jail which was usually filled with a lot of young people. The women decided to make up toiletry kits, containing such personal items as a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, and a piece of candy to make their stay a little bit brighter.

When the women actually visited at the prison, they were taken aback by the antiquated conditions, the harsh procedures and excessive force practised there. One of the women stood up at a church meeting and said she felt their local jail was a disgrace and was doing more to encourage crime than stop it. When a deputation from the church went to the prison authorities to complain, they were told by the warden to keep their noses out of the correctional system and stick to church business. "Excuse me but this is church business!" shouted one of the women as she pounded her fist on his desk and demanded that their concerns be heard. Eventually, an investigation was launched. Many of the prison officers were replaced with new staff. New and more humane guidelines were established. And gradually things changed for the better.⁸

Now, the great thing is that initiatives like this, inspired by God's love and motivated by the care and compassion of the Good Samaritan, ripple outwards and have a more widespread effect than we can ever imagine.

For what happens on a micro scale invariably impacts what happens on a macro scale. What happens in the world "writ small" affects what happens in the world "writ large". When it does, when the love of God changes things in our local community, it also unfailingly changes things in a global context. And then we begin to make real progress in transforming the world in which we live today.

The wonderful thing is that you and I can actually make this progress happen. We can do it if we will just but take the risk in the course of our daily lives and, like these women in Pine Mountain, simply practise the love of the Good Samaritan.

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¹ Tour de France, www.wikipedia.com, Coyle, Daniel (16 July 2006). "[What He's Been Pedaling](#)". *New York Times Magazine*

² This is something I find hard to believe because the longest-standing athletic world records are women's records. The 800 metre mark of 1:53:28, for instance, has not been broken in 25 years of competition.

³ By 2020, says a study published in the journal *The Sciences*, women will run the 10,000 metre run a full minute faster than men.

⁴ Joseph b. Verrengia, "Scientists keep probing as Olympians push performance limits", *The Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 2000, p. A9

⁵ Life Expectancy By Age 1850-2004

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005140.html>

⁶ Many say that, though they have abandoned the organised church, they still are very much into spirituality. But, somehow, one feels that this is more about salving consciences than it has to do with any kind of commitment to God or to the cause of Jesus Christ.

⁷ Luke 10:25-37

⁸ William H. Willimon, *What's Right with the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), pp. 74-78. Cf.

also King Duncan, "The Difference Is You",

www.eSermons.com