

Unfinished Business

Mark 1:1-11

First Sunday after Epiphany

9th January 2011

Wasn't that quite an implosion at the World Junior Hockey Championships in Buffalo this past week? Canada well and truly snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, didn't they? It looked as if they had the game well and truly sewn up. They were winning 3-0 up against the Russians going into the final period and yet managed to let in 5 goals before the end of the game. How that must have hurt those young players, let alone their fans! It might have been better to lose 5-0 than be poised to win and then not be able to deliver.

Unfortunately, that kind of collapse is very frequent in a wide range of sports. We see it in basketball, baseball, soccer and golf, to name but a few. Teams or individuals play well for all or part of a game or tournament, but then, at the last gasp, they just can't deliver. They just can't seal the deal, so to speak. Or, in common parlance, they "choke".

Whether in sports or in other areas of life, one of the worst feelings known to humanity must be the inability to finish the job, whatever that job may be. To start out with great expectations, with lofty hopes and a grand plan, and yet when the chips are down, not to be able to bring things to their desired conclusion.

If you ever visit Edinburgh in Scotland, you will see what is perhaps the world's most famous unfinished building. The National Monument on Calton Hill overlooking the city has remained incomplete for nearly 200 years.

The structure was part of a grandiose plan to create a skyline that would help Edinburgh become known as "the Athens of the North". But, when construction was halfway though, money ran out and the work had to be abandoned. Hearing of their neighbour's plight, the city of Glasgow offered to put up the money for completion of this high-profile landmark. But the acceptance of such a gift from a long-time urban rival was completely unthinkable. Pride and poverty were preferable to bounty and benevolence. So there the memorial stands to this very day for all to see. In all the glory, or perhaps shame, of its fragmented state. A monument to the unfinished.¹

Of course, we do not need to look so far away to see a monument to the unfinished things of life. Indeed, such monuments are no further away than our own homes. In all those jobs we started so enthusiastically but have left undone. What about those Christmas cards we were going to send out but are still lying in their boxes unopened and unmailed? How about those rolls of wallpaper sitting unused in the closet? Or, how about those drapes for the family room lying in the sewing basket waiting to be hemmed? Or, what about that letter

we started to write to Aunt Gertrude when she was in the hospital? Or, what about that new deck that we only got half-built last summer? We only need to look round any of our homes to find a veritable catalogue of unfinished tasks. Good intentions but no end results.

So often, of course, the reason why we don't finish the course comes down to discouragement. Maybe we get so far behind or think we can never succeed that we give up prematurely believing that failure is the only outcome.

In Ottawa recently, when I was trying to talk some sense into Ste ... Oh, I'm sorry, I am confused! That part belongs to the alternative sermon I had planned for today entitled "Totally Impossible Tasks"! No, let me start again and let me tell you about a much more enjoyable activity. In Ottawa recently, I was playing Snakes and Ladders with my two grandchildren. At one point in the game, 6 year old Alex had fallen so far behind his 4 year old brother, his grandfather from Newfoundland and myself, that he started to cry out of frustration and wanted to give up.

However, we two grandfathers kept encouraging the young lad to stick with the game. We also imparted the usual grandfatherly wisdom that playing isn't all about winning but enjoying the game and being happy for the person that did win. Alex wasn't too sure about that but he continued to play through the tears. Then, lo, and behold, without any hidden adult intervention or manipulation, his marker eventually fell on one of the big ladders that took him right up past the rest of us and, in a few short moves, took him right on to the winning square.

What an important lesson it was for him! That it pays never to give up. Never to become discouraged. Never to leave the job in an unfinished state because we think that success is out of the question and there's no point in going on.

Looking back in biblical history, one person who cannot be blamed for leaving things in an unfinished state was John the Baptist. In the world of the 1st century, amidst an absolute abundance of fire-brand evangelists wandering the Galilean countryside, John stood head and shoulders above the rest. He was a prince among preachers. The Billy Graham of his times. A spell-binding orator who drew crowds from all over Judea to hear his highly demanding message of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

When Jesus came along and asked John to baptise him in the Jordan, the significance and symbolism of that occasion was not lost on him. Though he, John, had hoped to be God's Chosen One, he did not fail to recognise

instinctively that he was not going to fill that unique role. He knew full well, at that point, it would be the man from Nazareth was. No doubt about it.

Now, nobody could have blamed John if he was upset at being eclipsed in this way. Nobody could have blamed him for stepping back, giving up his preaching ministry, and retiring to the anonymity of the wilderness. But John was made of a different mettle. Rather than bowing out, he readily and humbly adapted to this change in God's plan for him. He would not fail to finish his life's work but now it would be by undertaking a new and most important job: playing second fiddle. He would now point others to Jesus, the true light of the world. He would put people in touch with the one who could really save them from their sins. The Anointed One. The Messiah. God in human form.²

Oh, if only we could follow through in our commitment to Jesus Christ as John the Baptist did! But, how often do we stop short of finishing the job? We are good at beginning things, but not so hot when it comes to seeing them through to the end. We love the idealism of following a great man such as Jesus but, when it comes to translating his teachings into practice, it's a different matter. When it comes down to specific situations of acting in forgiving, compassionate, understanding, tolerant ways, then we back off. We leave things unfinished. Incomplete.

In the church too, are we not all good at starting things but then giving up halfway through? We take on this job or volunteer for that one but then falter midway without seeing it through to the end. For one reason or another we lose momentum. Maybe other more interesting pursuits come along. Or, we don't get our own way. Or, there's a personality conflict. Or, we feel that nobody appreciates our efforts. So we don't stay the course. We leave unfinished business. Which means the work of Jesus Christ loses out. It only gets half-done.

But our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is so important, so urgent, in these critically challenging days that we cannot afford to leave unfinished business. Again and again, the Bible impresses on us the virtues of finishing the course on which we have embarked as disciples of Christ. "The person that endures to the end shall be saved,"³ says Jesus at one point. Then adds at another, "Whoever puts his hand to the plough and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."⁴ Then Paul exhorts his hearers in Galatians, "Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."⁵ And James adds, "Blessed are those who endure temptation: for when they are tried, they shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him."⁶ Over and over, we are encouraged not to give up till the job Christ has entrusted to us is properly completed. And, if we do, the results can surprise us.

When Canadian Presbyterian missionary, John Geddie, went from Nova Scotia to the South Pacific island

of Aneityum in the 1840s, he and his wife were met with the most virulent hostility, not only from the superstitious native peoples immersed in their ancient spirit-world religion, but even more so from Roman Catholic missionaries and European whalers who saw the presence of these new missionaries as a threat. By 1850, John Geddie was so discouraged he noted, despairingly, that, since arriving, there had been "no extensive movement to Christianity ... they only come in one by one ... few come to hear ... All manner of evil is spoken against myself as well as the few native converts, and many threats have been made against my life ... We are sowing in tears. We are in the midst of enemies white and black."

But, then, in 1851, a miracle happened. For no apparent human reason, many of the tribal chiefs renounced heathenism, and sought instruction in the Gospel. Many ordinary tribes-people, too, were converted. Scores were subsequently baptised – not only women but also men. In a very short time, the church began to grow like a mushroom. Deacons and elders were elected. Congregations increased beyond belief

By 1859, amazingly, the entire population of 3,000 people had embraced Christianity. The old spirit-religion, with all its associated evil beliefs and practices, had completely lost its grip. A most fitting epitaph to Geddie's achievements was written on a memorial in his old church: "When John Geddie landed in Aneityum in 1848, there were no Christians. When he left in 1872, there were no heathens."⁷

Oh, how God blessed John Geddie's work and how he still blesses the work of those who, called to the Christian cause, don't give up, don't leave the job unfinished, but are willing to stick with it and see it through to the end, no matter what the cost.

Let's make it one of our New Year's resolutions that we will apply ourselves with similar commitment and conviction to all areas of our lives and not leave any unfinished business. As Christians – in our homes, at our work, in our church, or wherever – let us renew our commitment to complete more fully our God-given tasks. Above all, let's show that we Christians have real finishing ability in 2011!

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¹ edinburghguide.com

<http://www.edinburghguide.com/travel/visitor/caltonhill.htm>

² Mark 1:1ff

³ Matthew 24:13

⁴ Luke 9:62

⁵ Galatians 6:9

⁶ James 1:12

⁷ Graham Miller, *Called To Witness*, Profiles of Canadian Presbyterians, Ed. W. Stanford Reid, Presbyterian Publications, 1975