

## Column

Ending well is a subject of universal concern, or should be. After all, all die.

I think it is safe to say that most people want their life to count for something. They want to make their mark, leave some sort of legacy.

When parents look into the eyes of their new-born baby, they see boundless potential. They want to give that child the very best possible beginning. Who knows what those little hands one day will accomplish?

However, beginning well is not enough. Most of us have known people who had good beginnings as children and who showed great promise as they entered young adulthood, yet who did not end well. They were attractive physically. They were the top of their class. They were the ones voted most likely to succeed. They won scholarships. They married well. But they did not follow through. "Wasted years" might be the title of their life's story.

One example is found in the story of Saul, the first king of Israel in the Bible. Tall, handsome and looking every part of a king, Saul made a good beginning. He was humble, proved himself a good military leader and was filled with the Spirit of the Lord.

Yet, his life did not end as it began. Success and power went to his head. Humility was replaced with pride, obedience with disobedience, faith with jealousy, courage with fear. Deeper and deeper, he descended into the darkness of sin until there was no turning back.

At the end of his life, no longer able to hear God's voice, he sought counsel from a median, the witch of Endor. Finally, after a fierce battle in which he was mortally wounded, he fell on his own sword. The victors then took his body and hung it on a wall in one of their cities as a trophy.

A second example, which in many respects parallels the life of Saul, comes in the person of a 20<sup>th</sup> century American bishop by the name of James Albert Pike. His memory has now receded over the horizon, but 50 years ago his was very much a household name.

Like Saul he began well. He had a bright mind, taking up first law and then seeking and receiving ordination in the Protestant Episcopal Church. During his early years as a clergyman, he wrote books which, for the most part,

were theologically sound and pastorally helpful. He hosted a television programme which vied in popularity with that of Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen, and he held a number of key church posts, including Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and later Bishop of California.

Yet, his life ended quite sadly. After struggling with alcoholism and having a history of marital infidelity, he renounced virtually all of the doctrines of the Christian faith, got involved with spiritualism, resigned as a Bishop and died alone wondering in a desert in the Holy Land.

Both the story of Saul and Pike remind us that it is possible to begin well and yet end miserably. Words of a prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake, come to mind: “Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, that yieldeth the true glory.”

Before I continue, I should be clear that the success that ‘yieldeth the true glory’ is not primarily worldly in nature. Worldly success is a flash in the night.

True success is less showy and more lasting. It builds others up. It points them to the sky. It sets in motion ever-expanding circles of blessings which continue long after one is gone. It is achieved (better, received) by putting your hand into the hand of the Man of Galilee.

Ending well is hearing God’s “well done” at the end of life’s day. Settle for nothing less.

*LET thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and, that they may obtain their petitions, make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer.)*

*The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.*