

## Sermon. Paul's Letter to Timothy, *I have finished the race*

The English novelist Fay Weldon served time as a copywriter for an advertising agency in the 1960s. She is famous to this day for the brilliant slogan she dreamed up: Go to work on an egg. It has remained in the British consciousness ever since for its cleverness and meaningfulness. In my former life and career, I spent a lot of time with advertising agencies and have always been excited by clever word usage. Historically, presidents and prime minister have left legacies of wonderful slogans and rallying cries:

*"I have nothing to give but blood sweat and tears"*

*"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"* being two highly memorable ones.

This is a talent clearly sorely lacking in current political rhetoric, when name calling and abuse of the most sensational and salacious kind seem to have replaced motivational eloquence.

There can be no doubt that memorable exhortation works for two reasons: a compelling message, and incisive brevity. This sells products, wins hearts and minds and gets commitment.

If St Paul's last words to Timothy were anything to go by, St Paul - aside from being a tentmaker and later passionate convert to Jesus Christ - would have made a fine copywriter.

*"I have fought the good fight", "I have finished the race", "I have kept the faith:"*

Each and all of these little statements are enormous in their depth and gravity. They have endured and become imprinted in the minds of Christians, inspiring messages of hope and faith. We only need to look at what was behind them.

Paul has just exhorted Timothy to preach diligently because of *the spread of false doctrine and wickedness*.

He would surely be as concerned if he was alive today with the spread of false doctrines and wickedness propagated by people - often calling themselves Christians. And he would be even more concerned about those only too happy to believe and collude with wickedness and gossip and lies that are spread maliciously to disparage others, all too often in church communities.

At this point in his life Paul tells us the reason for the urgency he is feeling personally. Until now Paul has pretty much abstained from personal references in his writings from prison, but now he speaks from the heart. He is about to die, and you can tell he is reflecting on his life.

*"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure."*

So as he comes near to the end of his life, these are his feelings: that he had fought the good fight of life, that he had finished the race that God had placed before him; that he had kept the faith." So Paul is feeling victorious about his life, not that his life was perfect, but that he had done God's will as best he could. Paul knew it; he knew that he had been faithful unto death, never perfect and without sin, but he had finished the race that God gave him to run. And God wants you and I to finish the race that God has given *us* to run, to do the work that God has given *us* to do while we are here on earth as best we can.

I have finished the race, naturally reminds us of Christ's words from the Cross. He cried out "It is finished!" meaning "It is *accomplished*. While the Romans and the mocking crowds might have interpreted this as "*that's*

*the end of Jesus, the troublesome rabbi, the annoying thorn in the side – pun definitely intended.*” Instead, this is a victorious and triumphant statement. A cry of victory and achievement even at the point of an excruciating death. Jesus perfectly obedient to God throughout his life. And Jesus personifying God’s love by dying on the cross so that others might live, and so that at death on earth he might well cry triumphantly, It is finished. I accomplished what God gave me to do in this world. John’s gospel has recorded him saying, “the way I glorify God is to accomplish the work that he gave me to do.” (Ch 17) and what a blueprint this can be for us.

God wants us to feel that way about our lives, “It is accomplished. I have accomplished what God has given me to do. Not me, but Christ who lives in me. God’s plan and purpose for my life have been accomplished.” This is not bragging, it is just the way God wants us to feel about ourselves as we take stock of our lives, whether we are young or older in years. That we can say like the Apostle Paul said about his life; it might have been difficult at times, but I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith”.

Listen to this account of an incident 40 years ago: It was 7pm. on October 20th, 1968. Only a few spectators remained in the Mexico City Olympic Stadium. The winner of the 26 mile marathon had crossed the finish line more than an hour ago, and now, the last of the marathon runners were across the finish line and leaving the track.

As the last few spectators began to leave, those sitting by the entrance suddenly heard the sound of sirens. One last runner appeared at the entrance. The man, whose leg was bloody and bandaged, was wearing the colors of Tanzania.

The Tanzanian runner, experiencing intense pain, hobbled around the 400 meter track in the stadium, and the few remaining spectators rose and applauded him as though he was the winner.

After crossing the finish line he slowly walked off the field without turning to the cheering spectators. In view of his injury, and having no chance of winning any medal, a curious spectator asked him why he did not quit the race.

The Tanzanian runner replied, "My country did not send me 7000 miles to start the race, but sent me 7000 miles to finish it."

Those who know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior have also been enlisted in a race. Jesus has enlisted you not only to start the race but, more importantly – like the marathon runners – to finish the race – and to finish well.

*I've started, so I'll finish*, was the TV quizmaster's famous statement in the intellectual game Mastermind, a statement often imitated and perfectly understood by everyone in Britain.

It became an official catchphrase entered into the Oxford dictionary and remains so.

And here’s a story closer to home. At a lunch for local seniors in my Alabama parish, Bill as usual read some of his poems. One, a childhood reminiscence of harvest time on the family farm recounted the great day when with the usual glut of produce, the entire family was summonsed to spend a day from dawn to well into the night shelling peas and chopping everything up for a marathon day of canning produce to see the family through winter. Exhausted and weary well into the night Bill ended his account saying: “If you can’t finish the canning, you got no right to start.”

In Bill’s family there was no question you soldiered on till you were done. Which is what Paul was saying, with great satisfaction at his life’s weary end. Weary but also joyful. The kind of joyful satisfaction priests are privileged to witness when a dying person confides thoughts, as they take stock of how they have run their race and fought their good fight. And we might add, through the ups and downs of life, given their all and done their best. Fought in the sense of engaged fully.

And God wants you and me to have the same feelings about ourselves when it’s our time to die. No matter how imperfect, no matter how sinful, no matter how many shortcomings we have, Jesus died to accomplish forgiveness for us. Knowing that, God wants us to feel the same way about our lives as our lives are ended: Well done, good and faithful servant. It is finished. God’s will has been accomplished through your life. You have fought the good fight, you have finished the race, you have kept the faith. Henceforth, shall a crown of glory be laid up for you in heaven.” AMEN



