

Trinity 9 (2021)

One of the saddest figures of the 20th century was a Bishop in the Episcopal Church, a man by the name of James Albert Pike.

Some of you will have heard his name; others will not. If you have not, that's okay.

In his day, however, he was very well known. In the late 50s he hosted a popular Protestant television show. The Roman Catholics had Bishop Fulton Sheen; the protestants, James A. Pike.

In 1966, his picture appeared on the cover of Time magazine.

He was very bright, first pursuing a career in law, then after a few years, switching to religion.

He went on to serve as Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and later Bishop of California.

He wrote numerous books. One of his earliest was entitled *Beyond Anxiety*.

Another, which he co-authored with Norman Pittinger, a professor at General Theological Seminary, was *The Faith of the Church*. It was part of the Church Teaching Series.

All of which to say, from all appearances, he began well. In his early days, he was seen as a champion and defender of the Church's faith.

But his life did not end well. He died wandering around in the desert in the Holy Land.

But before this sad ending, he struggled with alcoholism, had multiple marital affairs, publicly renounced virtually every article of the Christian faith, was brought up on the charge of heresy and got heavily involved with spiritualism. A pathetic figure indeed.

In many ways, his descent into darkness parallels that of Saul, the first King of Israel, whose end we heard about in today's Old Testament lesson.

Saul likewise began well. He was tall and handsome, looked every bit the part of a king.

After his anointing by the prophet Samuel, he was ‘filled with the Spirit’ and prophesied.

Early-on he proved himself to be an able and courageous military leader.

Yet, as we have seen in today’s reading, his life ended with him falling on his own sword.

To add injury to insult, when the enemy soldiers discovered his body, they took it and hung it on the wall of one of their cities.

But, before this ignoble ending, as in the case of Bishop Pike, there was this spiralling downward into darkness.

He ceased from being humble and became proud. He stopped obeying God and began playing by his own rules.

And along the way, he lapsed into periods of melancholy and murderous jealousy, the latter directed toward his own son-in-law David.

In the end, he could no longer hear God’s voice and in desperation turned to a median, the Witch of Endor.

A sad figure indeed. One who showed great promise in the beginning, but whose life ended miserably. Perhaps you have known people like that. It’s heart-wrenching, isn’t it?

But stories such as Saul’s have their place in the Bible. Paul says as much in today’s Epistle. Recalling Israel’s disobedience and God’s judgment in the days of Moses, he writes:

“These things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition.”

Well, no doubt, the same can be said of the saga of Saul. It is written for our learning, for our admonition.

Its message is: don't let the sand of this world get into your eyes, don't veer from the straight path the Lord has laid before you.

What about you? Have you strayed?

Do you have the same fervour and excitement you had when you started your journey as a Christian . . .when you were baptized, confirmed or whatever?

Saul got off the road at some point. Don't let that happen to you. That is what the Saul saga is trying to teach us.

In 2 Peter 2:10, we find the charge: **“Make your calling and election sure.”** This charge still stands.

Look once again into the tomb of Gethsemane and see that it is empty, and then let everything else in your life flow out from this reference point. Get recharged.

In a prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake we find these words:

“It is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, that yieldeth the true glory.”

I think you get the point. Stay current with the Lord. Don't try to live off past religious experience, no matter how glorious they may have been. ///

Two closing observations:

The first is that the fate that befell both Saul and Pike, as we have already seen, did not happen overnight. Rather, there was a long, slow descent into darkness.

There was a compromise here and a compromise there until God's voice was silenced.

There is a lesson we can learn from gardening. It is this:

You look out and see a weed here and weed there, and you think, “I need to pluck them out.” But you don't. You put it off. What happens?

Well, soon your whole garden is covered in weeds, and there reaches a point of no return. The good plants are choked out.

The same is true spiritually. Day by day we need to pluck out the ‘little’ sins in our lives. Not doing so is a sure path to disaster.

The other observation is: going down our own path and not the Lord’s affects more than ourselves.

Saul’s folly ended with the carcasses of the best and bravest of Israel’s warriors being strewn on Mount Gilboa and the people of Israel scattered and left like sheep without a shepherd.

Don’t be deceived into thinking taking a little shortcut here and little shortcut there will go unnoticed and will affect only yourself.

No, we are “members one of another,” says Paul in Romans 12:5.

Sin is cancer-like in nature. Its tentacles reach out in all direction. It affects your walk with God, your Christian witness, your relationships, your children, often down to multiple generations.

It must therefore be cut out, completely. No, not even the tiniest piece must be allowed to remain. ///

Finishing well should be the goal of us all.

If Saul leaves us a negative example, another Saul (also known as Paul) leaves us a positive one.

The first Saul went down to the grave in the spirit of terror and dread.

The second in a spirit of resolute hope and expectation.

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith,” the second could say as he neared the end of his life. May these one day be your words and my words.

One final comment before I close: a word of encouragement. Finishing well is not something we do on our own. The God who calls and saves also preserves and keeps.

“The work which his goodness began,
the arm of his strength will complete . . . My name from the palms of his hands
eternity will not erase,” says the hymn writer Augustus Toplady. ///

In response, we can only say: Praise God! Praise God!