

The old town of St. Andrews on the east coast of Scotland is famous for two things. Firstly, it has the oldest university in the country going back to 1410, modeled on the University of Paris. And it has a delightful student body who wear red gowns. An unspoiled varsity town of 7,000 students with recent graduates William and Kate. Among those some time ago a young vivacious Californian student who studied music and worked in the Byre Theatre. And among them a handsome young British student who studied divinity and worked in the library.

And the second famous thing about St. Andrews is that in 1123 AD King David of Scotland gave the links to the people of the town. And on those links, 100 years before Columbus discovered America, the sport of golf was born. It has been played there for 600 years.

Today you can choose between 6 courses - one of which is for children. But you must walk the courses. No carts allowed. There are many amazing holes. There is the bizarre putt on the 16<sup>th</sup> green which Sam Torrance once described as like "putting over Dolly Parton's bosom". There is the 14<sup>th</sup> hole where they have Hell's bunker which is really a mine shaft. And I remember a great American golfer some years back - was it Jack Nicholas - taking six strokes to get out of it. My kind of golf! But not all of you are golfers, and I promise not to bore you with the subject this morning.

I could tell you other things about St. Andrews such as that it used to be the ecclesiastical capital of Scotland (but I won't). I could tell you what a Scotsman wears under his kilt (but there is absolutely no need for you to know!). So back to golf.

Many years ago I gave up golf. Before I got married my Californian bride said she didn't want a husband who disappeared for 4 hours at a time to the golf course. That was 43 years ago and now she says things like: "Have you thought of taking up golf again"? But I still remember the immense resolve you have when you look at that little white ball for the first time. You can't help hoping that maybe this time the drive will go straight down the fairway, be chipped delicately on to the green, and confidently putted into the cup. It would be perfect. But I have never had a perfect round. Come to think of it I have never had a perfect drive. My ball usually headed for the North Sea.

A good friend of mine, a Professor of theology at St. Andrews, once commented that golf is a parable of life. I borrow that idea for at my age I need all the help I can get. We never give up the dream of the perfect round despite all the terrible games we have played, all the false swings, all the deep bunkers of life. It is funny how a good day is so often followed by a bad day for no apparent reason. And that is how life is. Let me tell you about 2 people in the Bible who experienced life in that way. They both had the same name - Saul.

The first lived in the days when Israel's wild west period was coming to an end. The clans were gradually forging themselves into a nation. The old guard, represented by Samuel the prophet, resented the changing times. He announced that the people's call for a king, a secular leader, was contrary to God's will. An early example of a politician who claimed that his view and God's were the same. But cold and distant Samuel couldn't stem the tide of public opinion. Their nominee was a young man called Saul.

Saul was tall and good looking, but things went against him from the very beginning. For example when he defeated a tribe called the Amalekites, Samuel demanded that they were all to be killed - even the livestock. Saul didn't see the point of this. He only sacrificed the runts of the litter and kept the rest as booty. Samuel announced that not only was the king unpatriotic but also ungodly. So he snuck off and told a shepherd boy called David that come time he would get a shot at the throne.

But from that battle onwards it was downhill all the way. Everyone knows of how young David knocked the heavyweight champion, Goliath, out of the game with a well aimed sling shot. And the women went wild: "Saul has slain his thousands but David his ten thousands". Saul's poll numbers were plummeting.

It seemed that no matter how hard he tried, Saul just couldn't hit the ball straight. The 'black dog' (as Churchill called it) descended on the king. He was sliding into what we would call today clinical depression, but they referred to it as being possessed by evil spirits. You can call it what you will. We all know the disease that it is. The point is that much of it wasn't really his fault. Saul was a good family man. He tried hard but nothing

would go right. In the end he and his son died surrounded by his enemies on Mt. Gilboa, and even David wept at such a loss.” Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their deaths they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. How are the mighty fallen and the weapons of war perished”. We come into this world and the first thing we do is to howl blue murder. It’s a tough world and hardly anyone gets out of it alive. Loss and sadness come to us all even in childhood and they are never very far away when we grow up. Many a night Saul wept in his bedchamber.

Or come to the New Testament. Another Saul, this time from the city of Tarsus in today’s Turkey. We know him as Paulus - Paul - which means ‘small’. One remembered him as “a bald-headed little man, bowlegged, with a rather large nose”. He wasn’t much of a preacher, but he wrote great letters churning them out on his compute! An acquaintance remembered his bodily presence as weak. Anyhow Paul tells us of a great experience he had. He says it was like being “in the third heaven”. We all need days like that and we never forget them.

I remember seeing Oprah trying golf at Peeble Beach with Clint Eastwood. She swings and hits the ground. She swings again and misses completely. She doesn’t want to go on especially with the cameras rolling. But then she swings and hits that little white ball and each time she does she shouts: “Yes!” She is in her “third heaven”. We’ve all missed the ball many times and we all just occasionally hit a fine shot. And then our heart shouts “Yes”.

But Paul tells us that not only had he his third heaven. He also had “a thorn in the flesh”. It made him miserable. We don’t know what it was. Maybe he was subject to epileptic fits. Maybe he was going blind. He tells us how he prayed constantly to have God take it away, but he never would. There are no perfect rounds, no perfect lives. And then Paul says that God’s word came to him: “My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness”.

There are ruins in all of our lives - a shameful betrayal, a stupid move, a relationship that went sour, some dismal failure in family or work. We know what it feels like to be in the deep bunker, to fly off into the water trap, to be miles from the fairway. We all have to learn to live with less than perfect rounds. The worst thing about growing older is not that the body doesn’t work as well. It is surely that life’s sorrows pile up. We men find it easier to cry. Yet when we name the sore places in our lives, when we touch the inscribed wall or buy some flowers, when we look again at a photograph or come upon a faded letter we find comfort and healing. As the Scottish psalm says: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”. You’d better believe it!

Or the words of Aeschylus: “Drop drop - in our sleep, upon the heart/ sorrow falls, memory’s pain/ And to us, though against our very will/ even in our own despite, comes wisdom/ by the awful grace of God”.

Yes, wisdom comes to us in life much more through our sorrows and memory’s pain than through our successes. And it comes to us through the awful grace of God. Grace. It’s a word that we preachers use a lot. But what does it mean? I’ll tell you what it means. It means getting out there in life and playing the round as best you can, chipping out of the bunkers however long it takes - and like Jack Nicholas it may take half a dozen shots - enjoying the Dolly Parton putting greens - even if now imagination must make up for action, and accepting that you’re a poor sod who really needs a mathematics degree from St. Andrews to reckon up the final score card. All that. And then discovering with amazement that you are hailed by God as a winner when you finally make it to the clubhouse. “Well done, good and faithful servant”. The God who throws away the score card and simply says: “You were great”. That’s grace!

That is what Luther meant when he said that we are not justified by works, by how well we have done but by (as a Scottish paraphrase put it) “a God who loved us from the first of time, and loves us to the last”.

Despite old sour-faced Calvin coming to church is not beating up on ourselves, saying how miserable we are. Life is not about the perfect round. It’s about thanksgiving. And great, great gratitude because we have become aware that “goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our life”. Indeed they have! Or as a hymn writer from a previous era put it: “With mercy and with judgment/ My web of time he wove/ And aye the dews of sorrow/ Were lusted by his love. /I’ll bless the hand that guided/I’ll bless the heart that planned/ When throned where glory dwelleth/ In Immanuel’s land”.