

ST MARK'S 2017 FINAL SERMON

+ In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the great things about Ellie as a wife is that she gives me lots of good advice. One of the not-so-great things about me as her husband is that I sometimes dismiss it as gratuitous – by definition, advice which is unwanted, therefore unheeded ... but not, as I've learned to my occasional embarrassment ... not necessarily unneeded. All the same, I doubt I've ever been as publicly embarrassed by refusing advice as American golfer, Ray Floyd.

In the early 1970s, Floyd was playing at Augusta in his first Masters' Tournament. Back then, players couldn't bring their own caddies, so Floyd asked the caddy master for someone, who, among other things, would keep quiet. He didn't need any advice! Eventually the assigned caddy came and introduced himself: Floyd acknowledged his "Hallo!" then added: "And that's the laast thang ah wanna hear frarm yew, unless ah aask yew a quess-chon."

Everything went well until the 10th hole where Floyd sliced his drive into a clump of trees. After a brief search, he described to himself [*out loud*] how he was going to hit the ball through a narrow gap. Surprisingly, he executed the shot perfectly. Turning to his caddy, he asked: "How's that?" The caddy spoke for the first time and said: "Thaat ... warz ... nart ... yure ... barl."

Sometimes all you need is a little bit of humility. In Floyd's case, it would have saved two penalty points, and avoided the risk of disqualification.

Now, whether you think the advice I'm offering this evening is gratuitous, only you can decide. It's certainly not on how to search for lost golf balls [*I did enough of that when I was a golfer's caddy myself*], but it is on the subject of searching.

This year it's been almost impossible to ignore Adelaide Uni's rather astute ad: *Seek Light*. It's astute because it taps into a very basic human instinct. According to Bowling Green State University psychologist, Jack Panksepp, the "seeking" or "searching" mode is crucially important to us [*maybe the reason we liked playing hide-and-seek as children*]. "This instinct drives us," Panksepp says, "to be intensely engaged in the search for answers. It's why we enjoy solving a puzzle, or just being plain curious."

And of course, you've been right in the thick of it. The search for knowledge pretty much defines academia. And if, or when, you're an honours, masters, or doctoral student, who knows where your search will take you? Maybe to the innovative breakthrough which has eluded all others. But that's future!

In the meantime, what are you really searching for ... deep down ... on a personal level? Fame? Fortune? Love? The meaning of life? So many options, but alas, no certainties. Consider the quest to get rich. It can so easily become an obsession.

I doubt there's been a more obsessive seeker than the prospector, Harold Lasseter. In 1897 Lasseter purportedly stumbled across a fabulously rich reef of gold in the desolate south-west region of the Northern Territory. Unfortunately he became disoriented and was unable to relocate the reef on later attempts. Had the desert winds covered it with sand? Did he simply look in the wrong place? Or was it all just a fantasy, induced by an overdose of the desert sun?

Whatever the case, searching for the reef became Lasseter's life-long obsession. He died of starvation in the desert during his last attempt in 1931. To this day, the reef's location, if it really exists, remains one of the Australian outback's great mysteries.

You can spend your whole life chasing a fantasy. And the idea that wealth will provide lasting satisfaction is surely one. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with being rich of course. It's the obsessive, life-consuming drive to get there which is so corrosive and counter-productive.

Then there's the search for love. Several months ago, three bodies were found sticking out of Switzerland's glacial ice [*two of them disappeared way back in 1942*]. And it reminded me of a very tragic love search nearly a century ago.

Claudia, a wealthy, middle-aged, European aristocrat [*against all advice, gratuitous advice in her opinion no doubt*], fell deeply in love with a much younger man. In due course they became engaged. Not long after, while trekking together in the mountains of the sub-continent, tragedy struck. The young man slipped and plunged into an icy crevasse. Sadly, his body was unable to be recovered.

Distraught, the aristocratic Claudia embarked on the long voyage home. But she made a resolution. She would not let her lover lie alone and forgotten in a far-off land. And so, every summer, she braved the arduous return to the mountains and hired Sherpa guides to search for his body. Finally – on the seventeenth summer – success! The body was spotted, protruding from ice in a ravine. After a painstaking retrieval, Claudia once more gazed on her beloved's face, a little disfigured, but still so young and so innocent.

The Sherpas had already loaded the body onto a stretcher when, thinking to retrieve her fiancé's personal effects, Claudia reached into his jacket. There, in the pocket was a letter. An unposted letter! Curious, she turned it over. It was addressed to another, much younger woman. With trembling fingers, she tore it open.

“My true love,” it began, *“Not much longer and I will come to you. I will come as soon as I have parted Claudia and her money.”* Claudia froze. In horrified disbelief! All those years of searching – for this – a monstrous, heart-crushing betrayal. In a sudden fury, she ordered the Sherpas to hurl the lifeless body back into the ravine.

Shattered dreams! Wasted years! All of us know instinctively, that even the search for love can end in disaster.

Now I’m not suggesting that every search we embark on is doomed to disappointment or failure. But the potential is ever-present. Which begs a question. Is this deeply embedded instinct just an evolutionary survival mechanism? Or does it have an ulterior purpose? Has it been implanted by design, intended to propel us in the most crucial search of all the search for God?

Why we should have to search for God in the first place is intriguing in itself. There are compelling reasons but no time to elaborate this evening. Suffice it to say that unlike the search for love, or wealth, or anything else, this is the ultimate search, the one of eternal value, and all it requires is persevering sincerity.

That’s the advice of Jeremiah, an ancient prophet, whose contemporaries dismissed much of what he had to say as gratuitous. One king even cut up a copy of Jeremiah’s words with a knife, and threw the pieces into a fire. But to no avail! The message got through, and remains valid today. And it’s simply this: “When you search for me,” says God, “you will find me, if you search for me with all your heart.”

Gratuitous advice? Only you can decide that!

Amen.