

Olympics Sermon – 14.8.16

Canon Nicola Stanley

+ Over the past week I have become an Olympian couch potato. And something – unrelated to sport – that has struck me is that each time the coverage begins and the camera pans over the beautiful city of Rio de Janeiro, it takes in the huge and imposing statue of Christ the Redeemer. Representing, as it does, Christ who died to redeem us from those things which separate us from God, namely our sins, the statue of Christ the Redeemer is a potent symbol of hope and life. A much-needed symbol for the country of Brazil.

Well today is day 9 of the 2016 Olympic Games, and after a nail-biting build up to the opening ceremony and one or two hiccups including a mysteriously green swimming pool, Rio seems to have pulled it off. It's been an action-packed, exciting week. There's been drama – the ecstatic high points as medals are won and then the terrible troughs of despondency as bicycle chains snap, hamstrings snap, nervous hands slip off the high bar and emotions hit rock bottom. Perhaps it's for good reason, that parallels are often drawn between the vicissitudes of the Christian life, or the Christian journey, and that of athletes. St Paul frequently drew on sporting analogies and metaphors in his letters and he knew what he was writing about. In those days there were the games at Olympia, but also the Isthmian games in Corinth. Time after time St Paul used sporting analogies to underline the sheer dedication and team effort required if we are to succeed, together, in the race that is set before us as Christians. He likened athletes' quest for the perishable crown – at the ancient games victors were given a wreath of olive leaves – with the Christian quest for the imperishable crown, that of eternal life.

Nowadays athletes compete for medals and as they've been awarded over the past week, once again I've been struck by the interviews given by the winners. Without exception those being interviewed acknowledge the years of work and sacrifice that have led to this moment, but they also all want to thank their supporters who have made it possible. They know they couldn't have done it alone. They know and all those years ago St Paul taught that Christians and athletes alike are part of something so much bigger than themselves. And the passage we heard from the letter to the Hebrews even encompasses all those people of faith who have gone before, *'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.'*

Being a pioneer is always going to be challenging, and in today's Gospel Jesus the pioneer of our faith challenges us as he has a bit of a rant. He sounds frustrated, he came to set things alight, 'I came to bring fire to the earth', he came to change the world, but still his followers didn't get it. Through signs in the sky and changes in the wind they could predict the weather, but they were frustratingly oblivious to the signs of the coming judgement, of the indications as to how to interpret and commit to his message. Some of them got it, and some didn't, which Jesus warned would bring division in even the closest family relationships. What Jesus is teaching here is that nothing and no-one must be allowed to obstruct the path of faith in God.

Athletes know too that in their pursuit of the perishable crown, medals, nothing must get in the way of their goal. Their training regimes are punishing. In common with those on the path of faith, they will have to make sacrifices. Those unwilling or unable to accept this will be left behind, but those who do journey alongside the athletes will share in their joys and in their disappointments. They will become part of something much bigger than their individual lives and concerns.

So how do we Christians set about the pursuit of the imperishable crown, that of eternal life? We know that God's grace is freely given and we are all welcome at the heavenly banquet, but we need to be reminded that our place there isn't ours by right of birth, or athletic prowess, or wealth, or importance – God's values are Kingdom values and everything depends on the way we live our lives.

Living out those Kingdom values is demanding and testing, and early followers of Christ in the ancient world had an awful lot to lose. Jesus' message was considered subversive by the Roman overlords, and to openly follow him was dangerous. A short while after Jesus' death those Jews who believed him to be the Son of God risked being thrown out of the synagogues. Exactly as Jesus had predicted in today's Gospel, his message would prove divisive, his followers would risk being separated from friends and family and ostracised by society.

At different times in our history varying demands have been placed on those who profess the Christian faith. But one constant thread has been the demand to acknowledge our sinfulness, which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes of: *'let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.'*

Talk of sin isn't fashionable. Christians are criticised for being obsessed with sin, wallowing in guilt. But if we are to even start to run the race that is set before us, we must turn to Christ our Redeemer and acknowledge our human tendency to go wrong, to sin. Being weighed down by sin is to be held captive, in the Bible it's often described as a state of living death. Christ died to save us from this. By his death he offers us redemption and through God's forgiveness we receive new life, new hope, which is exactly why the statue of Christ the Redeemer above Rio de Janeiro is such a powerful symbol.

Returning to the Olympic Games, I'd like to end by thinking for a few moments about the advert that appears on the screen from time to time. It says something like: If you have been inspired by the Olympic Games and are interested in finding out more about the various sports, then look at the website.

Who could fail to be inspired by the athletes we've seen? By their dedication, their hard work, their enthusiasm and their example. They are almost without exception radiant in victory but gracious in defeat. Those who win a medal embrace those who don't, tears are shared and joy is experienced collectively. Everyone who takes part has been supported by teams of people who believe in them and have themselves made enormous sacrifices. All these people are inspirational because they know the cost of reaching their goal, they take nothing for granted and they are prepared to work hard to achieve it.

What might we learn from their example? Are we prepared to set aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us? As we look up at his statue high above Rio, do we trust in the Redemption Christ offers? Are we ready to make the sacrifices needed to achieve our goal?

The key to these questions is that we can't live our Christian faith vicariously. We aren't spectators here, we're participants. I have to step out onto the track and run the race, as do you. In order to do that, I must accept that I can't embark on this endeavour on my own. We're in this together. Success won't be a gold medal, it'll be hearing the words, 'well done, good and faithful servant.' Amen.