

“DON'T BE PUT OFF”
Hebrews 12:1-3

Unless you've been living on another planet for the past two or three weeks, you cannot have missed the Olympic Games from Athens. Even if you haven't sat down to watch the Games themselves on the BBC's wall-to-wall coverage, you'll have heard about them on the radio news, read about them in the newspapers or seen the items about them on the television news. And some of the interviews and images have been shown over and over again – Matthew Pinsent's fourth gold medal in the rowing (you'd have thought he'd solved the problems of famine, cancer, Israel and Northern Ireland rather than simply rowing his boat up a lake), Paula Radcliffe's exit from the marathon, Kelly Holmes' unexpected gold medal. And in interviews and press conferences, those athletes and many others have talked about their dreams and their goals. Whatever else they've achieved in their lives they've wanted to win an Olympic gold medal.

All of us, I'm sure, have dreams for our lives. We'd love to do this, that or the other - very often things that are actually quite unattainable. That may be because of our age now – the opportunities have passed us by (I shall never be the first labour cabinet minister to play in goal for England) – or because we are just unrealistic in our dreaming. Many of us have goals, though: things we really do hope to do with our lives, things which are realistic and possible. When I was teaching, the deputy headteacher used to set himself a different goal each year - something outside his career - and try to achieve it within twelve months. One year he decided to get an Equity card and described to us all how he had managed to achieve it. He still pops up from time to time in the background on TV or in the odd commercial.

As Christians we have a goal in our lives, something to work towards. The New Testament tells us in several places that we should be trying to become more like Jesus, with our ultimate goal being to spend eternity with him in heaven. I wonder whether we ever stop and think about the progress we are making. The late William Barclay, a great Bible scholar, once wrote, *“The Christian life is going somewhere, and it would be good if, at each day's ending, we were to ask ourselves, ‘Am I any further on?’”*

The person who wrote the letter to the Hebrews (familiar, no doubt with the ancient Olympic Games, of which we have heard so much this summer) used the analogy of a race to describe this progress. He talks of *“running with perseverance the race marked out for us.”* We are all following a course that has been set out for us by God – he has defined our destiny and given each of us the route to get there. Our task is to follow that route and to stick to it through all the difficulties and dangers that we might encounter on the way. It's a race that is more like a marathon than a sprint: it takes perseverance and dogged determination. We need to pace ourselves and to ensure that we are keeping going. It's not like a quick

sprint that is over in a few seconds after a dash down a straight and level track. It's a cross-country, steeplechasing, fell-running marathon.

And because of that it is so easy to give up and stop. The little phrase here in v3 is one that is used in other contexts of an athlete who crosses the line and drops to the ground with exhaustion and relief. The writer here is saying that, unlike Paula Radcliffe, we mustn't give up before we get to the end. We may feel that we are still on God's way, but the energy has gone and we are actually making no progress at all. Someone once wrote that "*Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.*" (Mind you, even Russian hurdlers get run over if they're in the lane next to the Canadians!)

There are all kinds of reasons for our wanting to give up what we believe God has called us to, for throwing in the towel while we are still a long way from the goal (now there's a mixed sporting metaphor!). We read here of Jesus' enduring "*opposition from sinful men*", but just as often it's not opposition but the demands that are put on us by other people, or deepening disillusionment with what we are trying to do, or just plain fatigue. How can we cope with that? How can we meet the expectations of the New Testament teaching? How can we ensure that we don't "*grow weary and lose heart*", that we end up as God's champions?

Let's just remember, before we say anything else, that all of us at some time or other come up against this. We need to be realistic and accept that no-one goes through their Christian life without at some time or other facing this problem - and it won't be just a one off. Anyone who tells you that they have never felt weary in their Christian experience, or have never been tempted to give up, is not being really honest. Some people might be better than others at hiding it, but it comes to us all. I don't necessarily mean that we are losing our faith or that we stop believing in Jesus and all that he has done - we just don't feel that we can do any more: we can't see the point in struggling on when no-one appreciates what we are doing or nothing seems to be happening or God seems to be a long way away or everyone else seems to be getting the blessing and we're losing out.

Well, this passage suggests that we can help ourselves to some extent by ensuring that we are properly equipped and trained for the race that we're in. Just as an athlete ensures that he or she is at the peak of condition and is wearing the right clothes (or, as the ancient athletes who are the example here did, no clothes at all: the word "gymnasium" actually comes from the Greek word for "naked". "Gymnophobia", the so-called fitness centre round the corner actually means "a fear of nakedness": presumably that's why it's a women only concern. Mind you, it's getting that way in modern athletics, isn't it? I reckon the runners just have their colours sprayed on now!), so we need to do the same. Get rid of the excess weight and the flapping clothes. "*Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*"

We can't make any progress at all if we are still habitually sinning and not trying to do anything about it. If we know that something we do is specifically forbidden in the Bible, then we need to be doing all that we can, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, to rid ourselves of it. It's relatively easy to identify such things, but a lot more difficult to deal with them, especially if they have become ingrained into our routines and attitudes.

But it's not just sin we are to think about: we are also exhorted to "*throw off everything that entangles.*" And those things may not necessarily be sins at all. In fact, for some people they may be things that are quite laudable and well worth while. But for you they have become a hindrance to your progress as a Christian. That job you took on in the church that is now sapping your energy and preventing you moving forward: that little task you agreed to do for a neighbour, to help them out, which has now become a millstone round your neck: that interesting and healthy hobby that you took up which has now taken over your life – all these things can get in the way of your running the race. You know what they are. You know that they might well take a lot of willpower to give up. You know that other people may misunderstand you when you say you have to stop them, may see it as a sign of lack of commitment. But remember that your first and most important commitment is to God, not to other people's notions of what being a Christian is all about. Let me challenge you this morning to have a careful look at your life and see whether there is anything that you are doing just for the sake of it, just for the sake of what other people think of you, rather than to further your progress towards the goal of being more like Christ - and when you do identify anything, "*throw it off*".

As well as helping ourselves in that way, we have been given by God two other helps (among many others) which are mentioned here in these verses. There is the "*great cloud of witnesses*" and "*Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.*" How do they encourage us in our progress towards the goal?

1. **THE GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES**

I must admit, I have always seen this as part of the picture the author is building up of an athletic stadium. Here are these crowds of spectators, watching us and cheering us on. Of course, that can be a great stimulus to doing well in the race. But I don't think that that's what the author means here. These witnesses are not witnessing our performance. The Greek word used here didn't really have that meaning at the time the New Testament was written. These people are an encouragement because they are witnessing to something else. They are testifying *to us* about something else.

Once again we have fallen foul of the practice of only reading a short chunk from the Bible and keeping to the chapter divisions which weren't originally there. To understand who these "witnesses" are we need to look back into chapter 11. Many Christians know that chapter as the catalogue of the "Heroes of Faith", the great men and women of God who down through the centuries have experienced the help of God in extreme situations. We won't read through the whole chapter now - much of it is taken up with the stories of a few great figures from the Old Testament. But just look at vv32-40. These were people who stuck to their faith and in the end, although they didn't get it in their own lifetime on earth, were made perfect with us through Jesus - they reached the goal of being with God through the work Jesus did on the cross.

These people – and the list could be added to with the names of those who have stood out as people of God since the coming of Jesus – witness, testify to the goodness of God, who "*turned weakness into strength.*" They are the proof, if any were needed, that God provides and protects in the context of eternity. (I think you'd have to twist things around pretty horribly to suggest that being sawn in two was an example of God's protection in this life!) But they are a means of inspiration to us as we do battle with those things that would otherwise knock us off course and impede our progress along the path of Christian discipleship.

Read back through the pages of the Bible: get hold of the biographies of great Christian men and women and read what God has done. (One of the most powerful recent examples is *The Heavenly Man* by Brother Yun, a Chinese pastor who has experienced and survived almost incredible persecution.) Find out about the ways in which other people – famous and ordinary – can testify, can witness to the empowering presence of God in their lives. Share with one another. Surround yourselves with this great cloud of witnesses and learn from their examples.

2. **JESUS CHRIST**

But don't forget that unique inspiration that we have as Christians – the Lord Jesus Christ. People are inspired by all kinds of other witnesses who are not necessarily helpful in running with perseverance the race that is set out before us. I remember watching a programme which featured Louis Farrakhan a while ago. He is the leader of the Nation of Islam in America, an inspirational black leader who is profoundly racist, unmistakably despotic and bases his teaching on a perversion of Islam popularised by a twentieth century prophet called Elijah Mohammed. There is no doubt that he is a charismatic figure amongst black Americans and his teachings have given hope to many in the black urban underclass. But it was most upsetting to watch him being welcomed as a brother, being acclaimed as a prophet and given the

opportunity to preach in a Christian church, because his message was about as far from the true message of the gospel as it is possible to get. (I mean, if you believe that white people are the results of an experiment by a black scientist that went horribly wrong, then you must have glossed over a fair bit of the Q'ran, let alone the Bible!)

We may derive our encouragement from the witnesses, but let us never, ever forget that our focus is to be Jesus himself. He is our inspiration and our example – our model and our motivation. As Eugene Peterson translates this, “*he never lost sight of where he was headed.*” He kept going towards the “*joy set before him*” and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The writer here uses two words that are found nowhere else in the New Testament to remind us what we should really be doing.

a) “***Fix your eyes on him***” Focus on Jesus, not on anyone or anything else. Keep him right in the middle of your sights and don't get distracted by the things around. As the hymn puts it, “*the world is ever near;/I see the sights that dazzle,/the tempting sounds I hear.*” There's plenty to draw our gaze away from Jesus - and, we have to say, it's not always the dazzling sights and tempting sounds of the world. Sometimes it's the fact that we have got ourselves into such a deep rut through our emphasis on activism and doing things for God, that we cannot see out over the rim to Jesus.

It's obviously not quite so easy in a marathon race as in a 100 metre sprint, but you will see the almost glazed over focus of athletes like Maurice Greene or Kelly Holmes as they wait for the start of their races. Or the almost manic concentration of the Russian pole-vaulters Isinbayeva and Feofanova as they waited on the runway before their jumps. They want nothing to distract them from the task in hand. There was an interesting moment when the runners were preparing for the men's 100 metres heats and a zealous official was trying to speak to one of the runners. In the end, the race had to be restarted.

Are you so focused on Jesus that in the end other distractions just have to concede defeat? Even those distractions that others might argue are not really doing any harm? This isn't a bad time to think about all this, is it? The autumn term brings with it new beginnings, new programmes, new possibilities for a fresh start – so why not resolve to sort this out, to say “I'm going to have to give that up while I get my relationship with God back on track, while I re-assess my priorities”? Think about it and pray about it - and then do something about it.

b) “***Consider him***” Take time to consider Jesus and his example. Think about him and the way in which he kept sight of where he was heading, how he maintained his relationship with God the Father. He “*endured such opposition from sinful men*” as he suffered humiliation and physical, emotional and spiritual agony. He was tempted to give up – at the beginning of his ministry as the devil offered him all

kinds of short-cuts to success; and as the end of his ministry approached when he pleaded with God to find some way of saving the world which wouldn't involve his death.

He faced all kinds of discouragements and disappointments from sinful men who were his enemies and from sinful men who called themselves his friends and disciples. But he endured it because he knew that there was something infinitely better ahead. He knew that the race marked out for him by God was actually the only route worth taking. He knew that if God had marked out the route it would lead to joy and fulfilment.

Now, if you consider that, it will help you not to grow weary and lose heart. Again, as Peterson translates, "*When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again and again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. **That** will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*" You see, Jesus himself was encouraged and kept going in his race by the power of a faithful and unchanging God, the God of whom the prophet Isaiah wrote in *Isaiah 40:28-31*.

"The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no-one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint."

He's still the same God - there are plenty of witnesses to that. And that God wants you and me to keep going, to reach the end, to receive the prize that he is keeping for us.

Don't be put off in your Christian life. Stick at it and never give up. Get rid of the things that are hampering your progress, and look straight ahead at Jesus. There are millions of others who have done the same, and plenty of people here to encourage you and help you on. You're part of the winning team already - Jesus has ensured that. Now live like a champion. "*Strip down, start running - and never quit!*"