

Walking the Way of Jesus with Paul

We have been dwelling on three key things that we might seek to nurture and encourage in ourselves and one another, **joy, humility and perseverance**, all things at the heart of the Christian vocation. I'm more and more aware that I am a practising Christian; that my faith is something I have to keep going at, that faith is something I *do* as well as something I *believe*. Today it's the turn of perseverance.

And today we are not thinking so much about walking the way, as *running* the way. It's striking that St Paul often uses metaphors from the sporting arena to urge his readers to *keep on going*, to press on, to strain forward to what lies ahead, to reach out for the prize that waits for us.

I am not one much given to sport or sporting metaphors myself, so I have to trust that there is something I might need to learn here. I have to shake off the troubling memories of being always the last to be chosen for netball or the one who knocked over every hurdle on the track. I was given a book about running for my birthday this year, and, so far, I have read the book... Sporting metaphors are also, on the face of it, unlikely to strike a chord in the congregation I serve when any sporting triumphs are buried deep in forgetfulness and where any church outing has first to consider how many steps it will be from the bus to the café, and then of course to the toilet.

But sporting metaphors are not just odd for me, they are odd coming from Paul too. By all accounts he was no great physical specimen himself. And he grew up in the kind of Jewish culture of his time that most likely hated the games, seeing them as pagan, Gentile, and all bound up with Greek and Roman gods, with sacrifices and idols. Games, running, stadia, gymnasia and all of that were a huge part of the *Greco-Roman culture* of his time, but they weren't part of the counter culture of those who were or who had been Jews. The Olympics began as a movement to embody Greek ideals and Alexander the Great used them as a way of creating a Pan-Hellenic world. Rome continued the tradition and the people loved it, as we all might love bread and circuses. The Romans preferred combat sports (think Gladiators) and the Greeks athletics. There were great theatres and amphitheatres built, huge stadia and running tracks. And often games began with a great sacrifice to a god or gods in a nearby large temple, and ambitious athletes made oaths to the gods in the hope of winning and offered sacrifices in thanksgiving for a great victory. There was a religious element to the games too.

It was Herod the Great (the one who was reigning when Jesus was born) who introduced games to the Roman East. He built gymnasia in Tripolis and Damascus, a hippodrome and an amphitheatre in Jericho, an amphitheatre in Caesarea. And once every four years he held great games in Jerusalem that filled the holy city with Gentile athletes and spectators who were celebrating the glory of Rome. Most of the Jews hated all this and didn't think it virtuous at all. The Jewish historian Josephus was offended by the nakedness of the athletes, the pagan worship near the holy city and the trophies of the Gods on the amphitheatres. And remember that it was the construction of a gymnasium and the holding of Greek games that

helped trigger the Maccabean revolt. This makes it all the more puzzling that Paul seems often to have used language from the games.

When he bade farewell to the Ephesian elders (in Acts 20:24), Paul said, according to Luke: "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may **finish the course** and complete the ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus - to testify to the gospel of God's grace."

In Galatians 5:7 Paul tells them, "You were **running a good race. Who cut in on you** and kept you from obeying the truth?"

And in 1 Corinthians 9:24 he writes;

'Do you not know that **in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.**'

And then in Phil. 3:13-14: "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and **straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize** for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Paul is writing of course, certainly in Philippi, to a largely Hellenistic audience, though it might be that many of them, like Lydia, had some sympathy with the Jewish faith. But it must have taken something very strong for him to overcome feelings about the games that would have gone pretty deep. It would be a bit like me finding a metaphor from the X factor or perhaps the World Wrestling Federation or the behavior of Donald Trump to commend the Gospel. So, what was it that so impressed Paul about those who ran at the games?

He seems most often to reference the perseverance of athletes, their ability to keep going, through the pain barrier, through that moment when the effort required seems almost superhuman, and to finish the race. He is impressed with the athletes who do not give up. He seems to be worried in this letter that the Philippians will give up on their faith, that they will lock the door of First Christian Church Philippi and go back to dyeing purple cloth or mining for minerals. He seems to be worried that if he dies in prison and his own mission comes to an end that they will feel defeated, as though the whole cause is lost. I imagine that he can't bear the thought that what might happen to *him* (and he can see it coming) will seem to them like the end of the Gospel and the end of the Church. And so he is using every rhetorical device he can find to help them see that God is with them and always will be, that even if their founder dies, even if the chapel gets converted into a Persian carpet warehouse, even if the Greek and Roman Gods attract all the celebrity sacrifices, even if.... (whatever happens), even if....it is vital to keep pressing on with the faith and indeed that it's possible to do, no matter what the toil and the cost.

So, he takes an image from the great celebrity culture of his day, and yet a culture despised in his own background, and he sees what's impressive in it. And he says, it seems to me, that if these athletes can press on and push themselves beyond endurance for these empty

pagan Gods, if they can keep going for the feeble prize of a crown of laurel, if they can keep pressing on in a tawdry human spectacle like the games, then how much more can we press on for Christ. He uses words about winning and losing and he says that even his greatest victories seem like losses because of Christ. And he says that he is forgetting all the prizes of the past for the sake of this one great prize of belonging to Christ.

In later times Paul might have cited the example of Eric Liddell, the Scottish runner and missionary, a Christian who was as determined in his faith as he was with his running.

“He is remembered among lovers of athletics as probably the ugliest runner who ever won an Olympic championship,” wrote the Guardian when reporting his death in 1945. “When he appeared in the heats of the 400m at Paris in 1924 his huge sprawling stride, his head thrown back and his arms clawing the air, moved the Americans and other sophisticated experts to ribald laughter.”

But Harold Abrahams, who in 1924 won the 100m gold medal – the event Liddell famously refused to compete in because the preliminary heats were held on a Sunday – surmised: “People may shout their heads off about his appalling style. Well, let them. He gets there.” (Simon Burton, writing in *The Guardian*, 4 January 2012)

Paul, by all accounts, was not impressive physically and was no stranger to mockery. But, he knew how to ‘get there’ in the faith. And he wanted the Philippians to learn that too and to receive that gift.

I imagine that many of us can identify with Paul’s fear that the church, fragile, counter-cultural, struggling, not strong, will falter in faith. There are days when whatever muscular Christianity might once have meant, we certainly feel muscle strain now. These are times when the action and the prizes might seem to be elsewhere than here. There are people I admire in the church, I confess, whose deaths I hardly dare think about, because I know I find it hard to imagine what the church will be like without them. There are times when I know I will find it hard to keep going and I know I won’t always, certainly, be able to keep calm. And when I feel like that I know that Paul is speaking to me. And I take courage from his words because he helps me to see that all those earthly prizes, all that loud cheering, all that success is as nothing compared with the prize of running with Christ and knowing the breath of the Holy Spirit in my lungs.

I hope you can identify with what Paul is seeking to say here and what he wants to do, to help a community of Christians that he loves to persevere in faith. Perhaps any minister who has moved on from a church can identify with this. Perhaps any faithful Christian who is drawing close to death (and resurrection) might know this. And I think it’s significant that Paul uses a metaphor for perseverance that could never possibly be interpreted as ‘keep the church open’, ‘keep up the coffee morning’, or ‘keep on going like you always have’. The metaphor is so far from ‘church’ experience that you have to think about what perseverance could mean, what stripping yourself down to the nakedness of an athlete could mean in ecclesiological terms, what straining and running for Christ, could possibly mean. He makes it clear that the past has to be forgotten, even the greatest of its moments and prizes, and only the future goal held before us, Christ himself. And he urges them (and

us) to keep going at whatever is good and noble and just and pure and excellent. How are those for criteria to judge our present church life?

But there is something more to say about perseverance. Paul's letter to the Philippians has been cited to found something long held dear amongst Christians in our Reformed tradition. Philippians 1:6 says, "The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ". Christians in our tradition have drawn from this what they have called the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, the belief that those whom God calls are given the gift of perseverance, so that they will continue in faith and not fall away. It is one of the five points of Calvinism defined at the famous Synod of Dort (1618-19). It is there in the Westminster Confession of Faith too, which says,

'They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1646 (chap. 17))

It's called 'the perseverance of the saints', but of course it's really about the perseverance of God. I rarely quote the Westminster Confession, but today it's a game changer. It reveals what we knew all along really, that perseverance is not so much a skill to be acquired or a virtue to be developed, but a gift to be received, from God's good and loving hands. And there are times in all our lives when we know our need of such a gift. The 'prize' of faith is not won by our own efforts and struggles, but by the grace of God, a grace which never ends, a grace that perseveres and will never fail us. Our God demands no sacrifices at the games of life, but in fact gives God's own life in sacrificial death with and for us instead. We receive the prize from God, without needing to make oaths beforehand and without the need to struggle until we have no breath left.

We don't know quite what happened to the little church in Philippi that inspired this letter from Paul. We know that Philippi itself was overwhelmed eventually by the Ottoman invasion and that all the remains there are now are some impressive ruins. History cannot always tell us what happened or what will happen. But if history cannot tell us all we need to know, faith can. God is with us, and will persevere with us. Paul so wanted to convey this to the Philippian Christians as he sensed that they might be doubting the resilience of God and the endurance of God's Church. Perhaps, today, his letter can be diverted in the post and fall into our hands, as though it were meant for us. Amen.