

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 11 August 2024, Year B, Proper 1,
Readings: 1 Kings 19.4-8, Psalm 34.1-8, Ephesians 4.25-5.2, John 6.35, 41-51

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

On this last day of the 2024 Paris Olympics and on the occasion of Liam's baptism shortly I am reminded of words penned by Paul the Apostle, who was steeped in the culture of the Mediterranean world of the first century.

“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Today on the last day of the Paris Olympics that began with the opening ceremony of which the artistic director said, ‘The ceremony will only be a success, if all feel included.’ It was a lofty ambition, but we can say simply and truthfully he failed. In response to the opening some groups and individuals called for people to boycott the Games. I didn't. Some of the sports I enjoyed watching were gymnastics, track and field, and the tennis match between Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz. It was humbling to see how much the win at 37 years meant to Djokovic. Still not sure about classical wrestling...

There were other controversies, but there is much more to celebrate. It was magnificent to see and hear Celine Dion sing majestically, L'hymne à l'amour from the Eiffel Tower with the concluding line ‘God unites those who love’ or how the athletes on the parade of boats along the Seine in the pouring rain weren't going to let the rain dampen their spirits! And the dancers danced superbly in the most trying of conditions.

For some athletes it is more than good enough to have simply achieved getting to the Olympics to compete in one of the trials. I was there! I competed! Others were disappointed that they failed to make the semi-finals, the final, didn't win gold or even a medal. Peruth Chemutai of Uganda was visibly distressed, devastated even having failed to win gold in the women's hurdles finishing second by 0.58 of a second, but still setting the Ugandan national record and winning silver.

Sport is a good lens through which to see how contemporary cultural developments with their accompanying strains and stresses are taking root for better and for worse. Be that as it may Paul the Apostle in a number of places in his letters calls on the imagery of the athlete to describe the race that is set before us as Christians, the race of each of our lives, there is a finishing point, knowing that his gentile readers and listeners are well accustomed to athletic displays. In the above Pauline quote the word translated as race/contest is the Greek word 'stadion' being a measurement of 600 podoi (600 feet). Yes, it is the word from which our word stadium is derived.

There were other games besides the Olympic Games in ancient times and amongst them especially the Pythian Games held in Delphi, the Nemean Games, staged at Nemea and the Isthmian Games each honouring a Greek god. The Pauline quote was penned for the church in Corinth, the city that hosted the Isthmian games. These four games were on a four-year annual cycle meaning there were games every year and in the fourth year of every cycle the Olympic Games were held. There were foot races, jumping, discus and javelin throwing, wrestling, the pentathlon (a combination of the previous five events), and boxing. There were chariot races, musical and poetical contests, and pankration. Pankration was a combination of boxing, wrestling, kicking, holds, joint locks, and chokes on the ground similar to martial arts today. As you will read on the Paris Olympics' website, 'no biting and no gouging were allowed - but all else was fair'. Someone should have told Mike Tyson of the 'no gouging' rule before he bit off a part of Evander Holyfield's ear. At the Isthmian Games hosted by Corinth

the victor's prize was not a medal, but initially a crown of dry wild celery (imagine), and only later a pine wreath, the pine being associated with Poseidon, the Greek God of water.

There is an obvious point to be made. Christianity was born in a society, the Mediterranean world that looks a lot like ours today, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious even pagan. Yet Paul was persuaded that in Jesus Christ, who was not a Roman Emperor and indeed is contrasted with him, had come into the world as its saviour and that it was Paul's calling to make this truth known throughout the Mediterranean world to bring about a unity under the rule of the Prince of Peace. Famously in a dream Paul is called upon to help the fledging church in Macedonia, thereby leaving Asia for Europe. We read in the Acts of the Apostles,

“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” (Acts 16:9-10)

Today Liam is to be baptised. His coaches, his mentors, his nutritionists, are in the first instance his parents and his godparents who are called upon to coach him in the ways that will enable him to run well the ‘stadion’ that is set before him. The imagery of the modern gym, where you are given every opportunity through the different apparatuses to exercise each and every muscle of your body for the sake of fitness seems apt. Last week we touched on our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. The Anglican dictum, moderation in all things, which comes to us, I suspect, through the Benedictine tradition, remains sound advice.

In the above training to run the race that is set before us parents and godparents are to be assisted by the local Christian community to which they belong, their local church, you, and me and each one of us. So we too must seek to be fit and strong for Liam's sake. Together we are to give attention to Liam's spiritual welfare, the things

he should embrace and the things he should reject that he may win the imperishable crown. Pray for our Kids' Church. Will he learn to say his prayers, to read the Bible, to be regular in Christian worship, faithful in Christian witness and given to good words? We sure hope so. One of the 1662 Holy Communion offertory sentences is from Paul's Letter to Timothy urging him,

"Charge them who are rich in this world, that they be ready to give, **and glad to distribute**; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation again for the time to come, that they may attain eternal life." (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Will he witness to Christ as many of the athletes at the Olympics are doing? How are we faring?

The great paradox of our faith is that being baptised into Christ means Christ has already won the crown for us. The crown of our salvation is Christ himself. Being baptised into a death like his, we are also baptised into a resurrection like his, a resurrection to eternal life, in which sin is vanquished and the last enemy death has been destroyed. The question is are we worthy of the crown that he sets upon us? Can we this side of eternity realise, live the crown that has already been won for us? The author of the letter to the Ephesians probably Paul, and if not Paul, someone from influenced by Paul puts it well when he writes,

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

As in his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul is concerned for and with the unity of the church, the body of Christ urging self-restraint not pride, but humility. Unity as a guiding principle I fear is something we have chosen to neglect over the last 40 years or so, even though the Church of England has made heroic efforts to include those

who hold positions faithful to the Tradition of the Church across the centuries and are now no longer the majority positions in what is termed the West.

In order to maintain unity we need to learn, to grow, to mature as is made clear in today's reading from the letter to the church in Ephesus in which the author counsels each and every one of us – one might include the heated rhetoric of many of today's politicians and on the streets and in the media – **to tone it down,**

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”

How many aspire or even give thought to the notion, inviting as it is, that my words, your words, our words “may give grace to all who hear”. This is sound advice, because hurtful words wound. They tear down. They fail to build up. Once spoken they are out there. They can't be wiped away. They remain. We can and should apologise, but best not to have spoken badly or in the Pauline phrasing indulged 'evil talk' in the first place.

As the Psalmist already pleaded with God,

Set a guard over my mouth, Lord;

keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)

Kirsten, Fletcher, Callan, Johanna, Ky when a priest is ordained the severity of the charge/commission that is being entrusted to him or her is spelt out in no uncertain terms. Hear how the bishop addresses those to be ordained and consider that Liam's spiritual development with which we are all charged is indeed a grave responsibility.

In the name of our Lord we bid you remember the greatness of the trust that is now to be committed to your charge/commission. Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people.

You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**