

## Enduring the Race

1 August, 2016

Reading: Hebrews 11:29-12:3

There you are, standing on the start line at the Olympics. You are wearing the black singlet of your country. You have been chosen by the people to represent your nation. You have trained so hard: every day for months and months, rain or shine. You dare to look up and the stadium is full of people, 60,000 people to be exact. But that's not all the people who watch you this day. Thanks to the TV cameras and the live stream many more millions will watch you run including the folk back home. This is your moment. It's the glamour event. They used to call it the mile. It's going to be like a very long sprint. What's going through your mind? What feelings are going through your body? What is it that will sustain you, and what is it that will give you the endurance to finish and even to win? As you crouch, you look across. There's that runner from Australia. Whatever else happens, you tell yourself, I must beat him. (I always taught my children that when you play sport, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, unless you are playing Australia. Then you have to die in the attempt!) You can hear your heart beating so hard, the adrenalin is almost overwhelming. And then ... the gun.

In a strange warp of history it seems likely that the writer of our second Bible reading today had in mind the Olympics. The dates all line up, but of course it wasn't the modern Olympics, rather the first ones held in Greece. It's almost as if this piece was written just for us. I like the way the Message version puts it: *Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he ploughed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

What a fabulous image of the Christian life - a running race. The writer draws on everything he knew about running a race to give us tools to endure in our faith race.

Imagine, again, that you are running at the Olympics. What is it that would give you the endurance to keep running. A major source of encouragement would be those that have gone before - the Jack Lovelocks, the John Walkers. To put on that black singlet would fill you with memories of those great veterans. It's no different in our faith. The author passionately desires his audience to hold fast, to endure, to remain strong until the end. In other words, they need to continue trusting God in order to remain in faith. So the writer names some of the great veterans: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and his family, Moses, Rahab. With the reciting of each of these names, the original audience would be invigorated. They knew the stories.

When I was in the States, I went to a little church, and they had the practice of recounting a litany of the saints. It sounds boring but in fact it was very uplifting. It was pretty random. Someone would call a name out and then everyone would say, "Thanks be to God". What was lovely was that the leader said a few you would expect, like Francis of Assisi and everyone went "Thanks be to God", but after awhile people called out the names of people who had been encouragers in the faith for them. "Mable my grandma", "Thanks be to God", "the Reverend George", "Thanks be to God". I wonder if you had to call out someone who had encouraged your faith, and is now dead, who you would name. Sometimes they are giants in the faith, but most times they are unassuming people who got on and encouraged you.

I was struck by the story of one young woman. She had left her home town and gone to university. As a girl her family had taken her to church, and at that church there had been a little, fragile old woman who had given her a hug every time she saw her. At university her life went off the rails, she got into drugs and hit rock bottom. About to take her own life, she turned back at the last moment. Asked later what had made the difference, she said what had brought her back from the edge was the memory of the woman who had offered her unconditional love.

The writer of Hebrews calls those that have gone before us who are cheering us on the 'great cloud of witnesses'. In the Creed we call them the 'communion of saints'. Most days we are reminded of some of them in our Calendar of Saints. Yesterday it was Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing. Tomorrow it is Mary, the mother of our Lord. Hebrews sees the veil between this world and the next as very thin, and the 'cloud of witnesses' as very, very close. So ... to win your race, look to the veterans.

The next tool Hebrews gives us to win this race of faith, is the community of faith - those who cheer us on in the great stadium that surrounds us. We only need one or two people that we know to cheer us on. But we do need them. Who do you have on your cheer team? Everyone needs a cheer team and there is no better place to find one than amongst other church folk.

I don't know about you, but if I found myself on the starting blocks at Rio, I would make sure I had my shoelaces done up. Don't let anything trip you up says Hebrews talking about the sin that clings so close.

And finally, look to the ultimate goal. The gold medal for the Christian is Jesus. We look to a greater intimacy and union with Jesus as our prize. There is no other Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith.

Lastly comes the joy, the finishing line. The crowd is on its feet. You have beaten the Australian. You have endured, and won the crown.