

Readings: Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

In terms of medals, Birmingham has been the most successful Commonwealth Games ever for NZ. "Why was that?" the New Zealand Chef de Mission was asked, "Why were these games so successful?" He named the athletes, of course, but he also named the people of Birmingham. "They have just been such good crowds. Cheering on our athletes and making us feel at home." Those of you watching Tom Walsh, the shot putter from Timaru, may have seen him working the crowd, and getting the 15,000 people cheering him on to his gold winning performance.

In our epistle reading (epistle means letter) this is exactly what the writer of our reading had in mind when he wrote of the "great crowd of witnesses." A stadium packed full of people all cheering the runner on. He had in mind the first Olympics, not the Commonwealth Games of course.

To be a Christian in our world we need the encouragement of the great cloud of witnesses, those dead heroes of the faith but also those living. We call them the 'communion of saints' in the Creed.

Jesus pulls no punches in the difficulties we can face when we follow him in the Gospel. Sometimes it is family members set against each other. Often people talk to me of the difficulty of having faith when their partner doesn't or when their children or neighbours or boss doesn't. One person shared with me how they wanted to go to church on Sunday and asked their boss. "You can go to church any day, but you must work on Sunday," was the response.

Our church has just finished the equivalent of its Commonwealth Games. Lambeth is a once in every 10 years international gathering, although this one was delayed, like everything else, for Covid. Bishops gathered just down the road from Birmingham, some 650 of them with their spouses from 163 different countries, skillfully led by the Archbishop of Canterbury. What a number of delegates from the so-called developed world quickly realized was how difficult it is to be a Christian in other parts of the world. For us it's mostly apathy that makes being a Christian hard work, for many in our world it's a matter of life or death.

The Archbishop of Canterbury told the story in his opening address of going to Nigeria and being held overnight by one of the militia leaders in the Delta. *I'd gone to see him as part of a reconciliation project and I had safe conduct, I was with a local leader. And when we got there, he was drunk and drugged, and we were several hours in a boat from anywhere safe.*

*He said, 'take these people out and kill them', and my local colleague persuaded him this was a bad idea. So, he said 'Okay take them to the hotel', where we were locked in and guarded, and he said, 'I'll decide whether or not to kill you in the morning.'*

*In the morning he was sober. He was polite and hospitable but still a man with a gun, showing us around the town. And as we turned the corner, on one horizon was an oil company platform in the marshes pumping oil for a major company. I could see helicopters flying in and out, lights from good generators. I am sure they had excellent air conditioning, excellent medicine and excellent food and water. Around me, as I stood next to this man, children played in the sewage filled streets.*

So how are we to cope as Christians in this sort of world. Just as Tom Walsh and the other athletes did, we need encouragement. We need to hear the voices of the great crowd of witnesses around us. Here at St Peter's, as Peg wisely pointed out, we are literally surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, the burial site of our ancestors is all around us.

I went to a little church in the States that had a great way of hearing the encouragement of the saints that have gone before us. The vicar started by calling out the name of a saint, and then everyone would say, thanks be to God. This week the official record of saints includes Mary Sumner, thanks be to God, Lawrence, thanks be to God, Clare of Assisi, thanks be to God, Florence Nightingale, thanks be to God. What was pretty cool about this church was they didn't stop there. People were encouraged to say aloud the names of people who had encouraged them in the faith, and they did. One person said Auntie Mable, thanks be to God. We could add this week, Dorothy, thanks be to God, Graham, thanks be to God. Who would you say if I asked you? I'm not going to embarrass you but fill in the dots ... thanks be to God.

The writer of Hebrews names some of his heroes of the faith, but we all have them.

I knew one young woman who grew up in the country. Her family used to take her to the small congregation of Anglicans that gather each Sunday morning. There was one lady who took a special interest in her, always asking how she was, sometimes even giving her a hug. The young woman grew up went to university but got into a bad group and after a relationship break up, got very close to taking her own life, but she told me what pulled her back from the brink was the knowledge of that little congregation and that one person who always showed an interest in her and encouraged her.

To be a Christian in our world we need the encouragement of the great crowd of witnesses; those dead heroes of the faith and those living saints as well.

Jesus knows full well how difficult being a Christian can be, but with the encouragement of others we can do it.

This week your homework is to find someone to encourage in their Christian life.