

‘Finishing Well’

Readings: 1 Kings 3: 1 – 15 and 2 Timothy 4: 1 - 8

If only I may finish the race” says the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts. And in many ways the metaphor is still a very topical one, as it was only a week ago we had the closing ceremony of this year’s Olympic Games in Tokyo. But this morning let me take you back to an earlier Olympic Games and those in Mexico City in 1968.

And one person who was expected to do well in the Marathon event in those Games was the Tanzanian athlete John Ahkwari. But sadly he did not win his event as during the course of the race he fell and injured himself and by the end of the race was limping, in fact it was not until one and a half hours after the first place winner had been announced that he managed to cross the finishing line - yet it was to rapturous applause from all those who were gathered in the stadium. And when he was asked why he didn’t stop and withdraw from the race he replied: “You don’t understand, my country did not send me 5000 miles to start a race; they sent me to finish it.” And so I’d like to offer a few reflections on this theme of finishing well.

And someone who did finish well was the Apostle Paul. And something he was able to say with confidence before he died was: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” And he wasn’t boasting. What he was saying was he had remained true to the course God had laid out for him. He had not only lived well but also finished well.

But someone who did start well but, sadly did not really finish well was the subject of our Old Testament reading and that was King Solomon. Solomon’s name apparently means ‘peace’ which, I suppose was appropriate since his reign in many ways benefited from the peace his father, the great King David was able to achieve during his reign. And undoubtedly Solomon did begin well but you can’t help noticing, even from today’s reading that the author is already hinting at weaknesses and problems in Solomon’s life that could cause everything to unravel if he doesn’t do something about them.

And another Bible character who doesn’t seem to finish well is a young man called Demas. It may come as surprise to some as Demas was a companion of the Apostle Paul and one of those who shared with him in the ministry of the gospel. He is mentioned by Paul in his New Testament letter to Timothy and this is what he says:

‘Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.’

Now I always have a tinge of sadness when I read this verse. Demas was apparently a promising young man with a promising future in the ministry but at some point was evidently drawn away by the bright lights and attractions of this world and sadly, we never hear of him again - and so we don’t know whether he ever came back. I am sure he didn’t initially join Paul’s team with the intention that he would later desert him when the going got tough. I’m sure he expected to stand firm to the end and to finish well. And, I think the story of Demas is a salutary lesson for us all, when we think about it, whether we are young or old.

And for me it raises the question of our own personal commitment. Is it truly centred and focussed on the Lord Jesus Christ? Do we give him the whole of our heart and not just a part? Do we give him all the honour and the glory or, at times do we get distracted and allow other things to creep in and take his place?

Well back to King Solomon. When he is anointed king after the death of his father he is probably about 20 years old and a zealous young man full of energy and ambition. And something special about him is that he has a desire for God. And as we heard in our reading, God appears to him in a dream and offers to give him anything he asks for. And Solomon knowing that he lacks the experience needed to be king asks for wisdom. And because he has not asked for selfish things God promises Solomon not just wisdom, but to bless him in so many other ways as well.

And so Solomon starts well and the nation prospers under his reign and becomes a real power house, at least during the first part of it. And perhaps his most memorable achievement is the building of the fabulous temple in Jerusalem, a magnificent structure and the first permanent place of worship for God's ancient people.

But there's a darker side to Solomon's character as well, in that he has a weakness in the area of relationships and he enters into marriages and arrangements with hundreds of women taken from the surrounding pagan nations – something that God has expressly forbidden. And the reason why God has forbidden it, is because he knows it will open the doors to idolatry. And this is exactly what happens as these wives bring their pagan gods with them. And this is when things begin to go pear shaped. If we turn to chapter 11 it says this:

‘As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord, his God.’

The popular Christian author, Philip Yancey makes this comment:

‘It was Solomon who first placed pagan idols in the sacred places of Jerusalem, in an attempt to placate his exotic wives. The earnest ruler who had showed such promise ended up defying all of God's rules against a king's excesses.’

Sadly, like so many today, Solomon had much wisdom for others but very little for himself. He didn't really finish well, as he became a king with a divided heart who left a divided kingdom. A king who allowed himself to be side-tracked into dabbling with idolatry.

But now by way of contrast let's go back to the Apostle Paul – someone who was able to confidently affirm that:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

And when you think of Paul and his faithfulness and perseverance in the face of all the trials and suffering he had to go through - he attributes it all to the grace of God.

‘I am what I am by the grace of God and his grace to me was not without effect’

is what he writes to the church in Corinth. And by that he has in mind the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit that the Father in his grace supplies to each of us as we seek to live for him. And it’s something that John Newton picks up in his much loved hymn ‘Amazing Grace.’ You’ll be familiar with the words – ‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.’

And something else Paul says is that he presses on to take hold of that which Christ Jesus has taken hold of him and that’s about perseverance pressing on to the end despite any obstacles and setbacks along the way.

It’s about moving forwards and not standing still. ‘Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us’ says the writer of the Book of Hebrews. And I like the way the Message Version of the Bible puts it.

“Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished the race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed...’
And that’s the key really to finishing well, to keep our eyes constantly fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ so we don’t lose sight of the direction in which we are going.

And in a verse a little before that we are given this wonderful assurance of us being surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses as we each run our own personal race of faith. And it conjures up this marvellous picture of a great crowd in the heavenly realms all cheering us on as we keep pressing on towards the finishing line.

And so that leads me into my final story which is also an Olympics story – this time Barcelona in 1992.

It’s the story of Derek Redmond, a British sprinter who there were high hopes for in the 400m event. Everything seemed to be coming together for him. He was running well and was through to the semi-finals. And as he settled into the blocks for the start of the race, Derek’s thoughts turned to his father Jim who had always been there for him, to give him encouragement and support. Well Derek was off to a good start and was running well when at about 150m mark, he tore his right hamstring muscle and fell to the ground.

Obviously he knew if he was to finish the race he needed to get up again, which he did manage to do and then started hobbling forwards despite all the pain he felt.

His Dad, then seeing what was happening managed to push his way out from the stands and past the security people on to the track. And then holding his son says “Son you don’t have to do this. You can give up now” and Derek says “No I won’t give up. I have to do this.” And his Dad says “If you have to do this, I’m going to do this together with you.” And hand in hand, with Derek sobbing, they continue with his Dad letting him complete the last few steps on his own, as the crowd of 65,000 give him a standing ovation.

And it reminds me of that great cloud of witnesses written about in the book of Hebrews cheering us on - as we keep going despite the difficulties and obstacles we

may face along the way. It also reminds me of our Heavenly Father who is always there for us and promises never to leave us or forsake us and to be always by our side whatever the circumstances. Amen

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