

Sermon
3 August 2014
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Holiday Club

For all of you who have been watching the Commonwealth Games on telly and longing to be there – we've brought it close to home for you! Because today you are sitting in the arena, amongst many other spectators... And this whole week the children from our own villages will be competing to win that gold medal... And by doing that learn all about winning a medal that lasts forever, the one we heard about in our Scripture reading.

The fact that the Commonwealth Games are taking over our lives for the best part of 2 weeks, is nothing new. People have been training and competing against each other for many many years.

We find evidence for this in 1 Corinthians 9. This passage was written against the backdrop of the Isthmian games. This event was held every two years, ten miles outside the city of Corinth. These games brought people from every part of the Mediterranean together - to compete or just watch.

It was a very high profile sporting event - drawing the empire's best

talent. Athletes would compete in foot races, broad jumping, discus throwing, wrestling, boxing, gymnastics, and equestrian contests. They would compete fiercely, each striving for the Isthmian crown - a wreath of wild celery.

Winners received a lifetime exemption from paying taxes and serving in the military. They would also receive free tuition at one of their universities, and statues of themselves would be erected along the road that led to the site of the games.

But the real prize was the celery wreath, awarded to the winner at the end of the games.

But as you can imagine, a celery wreath only lasted *that* long before it started to wither and die – and it's against this background that Paul is trying to explain to the people of Corinth that there is a different kind of crown they can work for, a crown that will last forever. And another difference between this crown and the celery wreath is that where only one person was able to win the wreath, the crown awarded by God could be won by everybody who took part in the race and reached the finish line. And just like you have to train really hard to win at one of the events at the Games, you have to work hard if you want to receive this crown too.

Paul says that in the race of faith he is not running like a man who is running aimlessly – because what would the point of that be? Even people who are not running to compete in a race, are usually running to get fit or stay fit – nobody ever just runs aimlessly. Without a goal

running seems a little senseless, but if you have a goal you can stay focused, no matter what.

Bill Burnett tells the story of a man who approached a labourer who was laying bricks and asked him, “What are you doing?” The labourer said, “Can’t you see I’m laying bricks?” The man then walked over to another bricklayer and asked, “What are you doing?” And the workman answered with pride, “I’m building a cathedral.”

Both were physically doing the exact same thing, but the first labourer was occupied with the present task, and the other was concerned with the ultimate goal. If we forget the outcome of our task, we will become bogged down in what we are doing.

And this is very true for our “race” as Christians today too. Every single day of our lives we are running towards our future, whether we like it or not. But if we have a goal, we won’t be running aimlessly. And for a Christian our ultimate goal is to one day end up in heaven, but our goal while we are here on earth should be to be the best we can be, to make God proud, to spread his word – and this we can do by staying focused and by persevering – because there is no better witness to others than being able to carry on in the hard times; to be able to lift up our heads and focus, even though life is difficult; to never lose focus of Jesus standing at the finish line with his arms open, even though we sometimes get tired and weary. To be able to keep on running, even in the times your legs cramp or you are out of breath completely, because you know that ultimately, it will all be worth it.

So what should our goal in life as Christians be? To get to know God better, to have a meaningful life here on earth, and to one day be with God for all eternity.

But just like any actual athlete, as Christians we need to train, we need to persevere and we need to finish the race.

But what does spiritual training involve for a Christian? We need to work on our relationship with God. We need to come to church, read our Bibles, pray, and then also *do* what we hear God tell us to do. And we have to do this often, because the more we do these things, the fitter we will become.

Nobody can just wake up one morning and decide to become a world class athlete and then go compete and win a gold medal on that very same day. But anybody can wake up and decided to become a world class athlete and start training... And then in time win a gold medal. It entails lots of hard work.

You can't decide that you want to be a Christian, but then do nothing about it. You have to work hard to understand what that really means – and that might mean that you will have to give certain things up, things that are not supposed to be part of the life of a Christian. All serious athletes give up certain foods to get them into shape, they sleep less so they have more time to train and they don't allow anything or anybody to distract them when they are focused on their goal. And they don't feel sorry for themselves when they do that, because they are working towards their goal. We Christians should be exactly like that.

Have you ever met an athlete who after one race never wants to race again? No – it's almost as if athletes get addicted to racing – the more you compete the more you want to compete.

And that's what it should be like for us Christians too – the more we learn about God and about life as a Christian, the more we will want to learn, the more devoted we will want to become. And the fitter we get as Christians, the easier it will become for us – until eventually it just becomes like second nature.

Paul didn't only talk about athletics in 1 Corinthians 9; he also referred to boxing when he said that he doesn't fight like a man beating the air.

I watched some boxing at the Commonwealth Games on telly yesterday afternoon, and how amazing was it when Charlie Flynn (a postie from Motherwell) won the gold medal for Scotland in the Lightweight title?!

I think the interview the BBC had with him after the match was brilliant! He said that he trained really hard – for a couple of hours every single morning for the past 3 or 4 years, no exception. In front of a huge crowd and millions of people watching on the telly, he thanked God for giving him this talent and the opportunity to compete, and then he threw in a humorous punch, by saying “the postman delivered again!”

We can't just say that we are Christians. We have to live it. Every single day, for the whole 24 hours in it. Because otherwise we will be like an athlete staying in the starting blocks, like a boxer beating the air.

We see and admire all these well trained athletes on telly, let's strive to become fit in our faith too. Let's do our best to become the best we can be.

We are all different – I can't imagine Usain Bolt competing in the bowling or Tom Daley playing rugby – but in the relay and diving they are the best of the best.

God made us all different for a reason – with our own gifts and talents he wants us to make a difference just where we are.

And remember – the world is watching. Maybe not on the BBC – but if you say you are a Christian you better live like a Christian, because somewhere someone is watching you and they may be making life changing decisions on the grounds of your behaviour.

So let's stay focused, like the competitors at the Commonwealth Games, like the Greeks did in Paul's time.

Did you know that the Greek work for victory or success is "nike"? Like in *Nike* – like in *just do it*?

On the cross Jesus gave us all victory, so let's go out there and tell it to the world. Let's tell it to the children at the holiday club this week. Let's show them, that in this church we don't run aimlessly. So let's put our running shoes on – our Nikes – and go win a medal that lasts forever. Let's *just go do it*. Because we have nothing to lose, and so much to win.

Amen