

5 August 2012

Reading: Hebrews 12:1-12 (OT page 1210-1211)

Sermon

The text for the sermon is verse 1: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

I guess everyone in this church have seen bits or all of the Olympics 2012 in London on the tellie... It will also be the theme for our holiday club in a fortnight!

It is also the background to understand our reading. We know that from prehistoric times, the Greeks had promoted athletic contests in association with their religion: like the Olympic games were held in honor of Zeus, the Isthmian games in honor of Poseidon. Competitive sports included boxing, wrestling, jumping, discus and javelin throwing, and, above all, the chariot, horse, and foot races. The Romans also had their own games and favored those contests that involved danger and bloodshed. There were races, wrestling matches, throwing the discus and the javelin, and, of course, boxing. Among the Romans the chariot races in the circus were far more

popular than the athletic races. The great race course in Rome, the Circus Maximus, could possibly accommodate 250,000 spectators.

The language in Hebrews 12 is the same kind of language that was used in NT times, when referring to athletics. Words like “perseverance” and “hardship” implies a marathon, rather than a sprint; the “great cloud of witnesses” refers to the crowd cheering the participants on, although the implication here is that the people in the crowd are all people who have already completed the marathon, and can therefore passionately encourage the participants - from experience - that it is all worth it. The reference to “throw off everything that hinders” probably refers to the Greek custom of stripping off clothes before starting a race, making sure that there is absolutely nothing that hinders a participant when running.

The letter to the Hebrews has more the form of a sermon than that of a letter. It is addressed to the second generation Christians, people who didn't know Jesus personally, and who were facing hardship and even the possibility of persecution because of their faith. And the purpose of this sermon is to encourage them to stand strong, to not give up, to “keep their eyes on the prize”, as a matter of speaking. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts his Christian readers to run their ‘course’ unencumbered in

any way, cheered onward by many witnesses including the martyrs of the past, with eyes fixed upon Jesus 'on whom faith depends from start to finish'. He uses Jesus as an example of someone who ran the race to victory already and prepared the race for the believers. He finished the race for the believers and is sitting at the right hand of God's throne. Jesus' life on earth must be the focus when the runners in the race of faith gets tired and weary. He endured so much more!

The author refers to their hardship as discipline. No athlete can win a race without proper training, and lots of that too. And that is never easy. Lots and lots of suffering come before winning a gold medal. Perseverance is the key to success.

Then from verses 4 the tone of the reading changes dramatically. The author comforts these Christians, by saying that their hardship is practical proof of their relationship with God. They must accept **suffering as God's instruction**. Rather than questioning their faith when they are persecuted, the readers are to embrace the suffering as a gracious opportunity to learn God's heart better. If they do not except it as God's loving instruction they are not his children, then they are illegitimate children! In antiquity, calling someone an "illegitimate child" was a grievous insult; illegitimacy negatively affected

one's social status as well as one's inheritance rights. Fathers were more concerned for their heirs and usually invested little time in illegitimate sons. The author continues to say if we respect earthly fathers and accept their discipline, how much more should we respect God our Father in heaven?

He ends this section of the sermon with the command that they have to "strengthen their feeble arms and weak knees", so that they are not only able to complete this marathon, but also help the people alongside them who are finding it hard to keep up, because after all, this is no ordinary race...

The last verse "Make straight paths for your feet" is a quotation from Proverbs 4:26 which means in our context: to run in the best possible way!

I thought the reading to be very appropriate as we are currently all experiencing the Olympics 2012.

We have seen trials, tribulation, sadness, joy and victory in all the Olympic sports. We saw sportsmen and women trying their best to achieve gold medals and also saw those who did not make it into the finals at all. We have also seen people participating with no sportsmanship in them like the badminton fixing scandal where the teams from China and South Korea deliberately tried to lose the game.

But today in our reading we read about another race which is in many cases totally different but also the same. What do I mean? Well to run in the race of faith, you also need to work and practise hard, every moment of every day. You also have to prepare yourself to sacrifice your time, your whole life dedicated to serving God.

To live life as a Christian is indeed running a marathon. It will not always be easy. It will ask from us faith hope and love to continue despite our feeble and weak knees and arms. But the good news is from the day we were born, we started this race of faith and in this race there is no-one better than the other. We do not have to be the brightest and the best, we can just be ourselves because God knows our hearts. We do not have to feel inadequate or having less faith than someone else. All we have to do is to run in faith with our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, waiting at the finish line. And we do not have to worry when we fall, when we get tired or weak. Another brother and sister of faith will through the guidance of God's Holy Spirit pick us up and help us to complete the race.

But the race of faith is also different in the sense that at the completion of the race of faith, all will receive a "gold medal" (by ways of speaking) from

God because in the race of faith, everyone who has faith in the redemption of Jesus Christ will be a winner. God see things differently than people do. Although our race can be hard and tiring and lonely and even sometimes seems to be endless, it is more than worth it – because every single participant is a winner. At the end of *this* race, there is not only one gold medal, but everlasting life for everyone. Whether you were fast or slow, whether you lost track a little or have been focussed all the time, whether you had to push others to the finish line or whether you yourself had to be carried there by loving hands, it doesn't matter. The anthem of God's love will be playing for you and the flag of his mercy will be raised above your head – and the tears streaming down your face will be tears of joy and triumph, because you will know that this gift from God, can never be taken away from you, ever.

Amen