

# Olympics

Series (Parts 1 to 4). Holy Trinity Twickenham, August 2008.

## Part 1: Introduction (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Matthew 7:24-27)

Less than a week to go to the biggest event in the sporting calendar: the Olympic Games. Thousands of athletes from around the world have been training for years for their big moment and the chance to show they're the best in the world. And because the Olympics is dominating our TV screens this coming month, we thought it might be fun to have a series of talks during August's services on Olympic and sporting themes.

From next week we'll be focussing on particular qualities that you need to be a good athlete, which are also picked up on in the Bible as well. And those themes are: endurance, victory and teamwork.

But today, I want to give a short overview of this whole area of Christianity and sport. Because some people might say: Hang on, what's the connection anyway? Why should we be hearing sermons in church on sporting themes? Well that's exactly what we'll be starting to think about this morning.

But before we do that, we've got to get the bad jokes out of the way first. Where does the Bible refer to sport? How about:

- Golf in 2 Tim 4:7 ('I have finished the course').
- Cricket in the book of Acts (Peter stood up with the 11, and was bold).
- The football team's motto in 2 Corinthians (So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home or away).

And there are more bad jokes where those came from. But in fact, you do get a surprising number of references in the New Testament of the Bible to sport, especially Greek athletics contests. Here's something interesting. Paul wrote a number of letters to the Greek city of Corinth. The surviving letters are what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians. And one of the things the city of Corinth was well known for was this: it was home to a big sporting event rather like the Olympics, called the Isthmian Games.

So St Paul and his readers would be familiar with something very like the Olympic Games. And he uses illustrations from athletes to underline some of the points he makes in his letters. As I say, we'll be exploring some of those themes as this month goes by.

But I want to start this week by asking a more basic question: is God interested in sport anyway? A lot of people will want to say: isn't faith about immaterial, invisible, spiritual truths? And about being terribly serious? And isn't sport about the physical body, and having fun? Answer: no, that's a wrong understanding of spirituality. But the very fact that some people still look at the world that way shows how many misunderstandings there are. Let me quickly outline a few ideas that are relevant here:

**1) Creation.** God is the creator of the world, and human beings are the pinnacle of his creation. Now, don't get sidetracked by whether God created gradually through evolution or in some other way. The Christian faith is clear: God is the creator. He made the physical world, and he loves the physical world. It's a weird twisting of faith to say that Christianity is about some invisible spiritual aspect of our make-up. God didn't make us as disembodied spirits, he made solid people with bodies.

Incidentally, as I often remind people, the Christian vision of eternity isn't spirits floating around on clouds. It's of people having new bodies after the day of resurrection. But that's another subject for another day. What matters here is that *matter matters!* In other words, our physical bodies are good.

**2) Gifts:** God not only creates us, he gives us gifts and talents. And he wants us to use those talents, for his glory and for the good of other people. Whether it's music or gardening or hospitality, or sport. God calls us to excellence in using the talents he's given us.

**3) Worship:** Some people misunderstand what worship is. They think it's only about being silent in prayer, or retreating from the busy world. Or singing hymns. But real worship is simply about living for God in the real world. It's about living our normal, embodied lives in such a way that's pleasing to God and helps other people. In other words, real worship is very physical and down-to-earth.

I don't know if you ever saw the film *Chariots of Fire*. It was about the Olympic runner Eric Liddell. Liddell was a very active Christian. And in that film, Liddell says: 'God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure'.

So are we saying that sport can actually be a form of worship? Absolutely. In the same way that an artist might worship God by painting or sculpting, or a musician might worship God with an amazing song or piece of music. Sport is another way of using our God-given bodies and our God-given talents.

And there's another issue here as well. How people handle fame, and success and failure in sport also says a lot about the values they live by. So the sports field becomes a place where you live out loud. In other words, where people see quite clearly the sort of person you are.

And a lot of prominent sports personalities are known for the faith they hold. Because they're in the public eye, and people see how they live. Somebody who's been in the press a bit recently is the Harlequins rugby player Ugo Monye, who is a practising Christian. And of course there are lots more believers, in all sorts of sports.

So the message at the start of this series on the Olympics is a very simple one. Don't separate off the spiritual from the physical, as if they don't belong together. God didn't make us disembodied spirits: he made people. Whole, embodied people. Sport and faith are more closely related than you might think. They're both about celebrating our God-given bodies and our God-given talents. They're both about life in all its fullness.

## **Part 2: Endurance (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Matthew 7:24-27)**

Last week we started to explore the issue of spirituality and sport, and we said there are more connections than you might think.

God is the creator of the human body. In the Book of Genesis, God declares our bodies 'very good', the pinnacle of creation. God is the giver of gifts and talents, and he wants us to develop those talents, to realize our God-given potential. Also, sport's a good reflection of the values we live by: how we react in a sporting setting can say a lot about our wider approach to winning and losing, and things like fame and ambition.

Another thing: when the Bible talks about spirituality, it's always down-to-earth. Our spirituality involves our bodies. The way we live our lives day-to-day. Faith isn't about a separate non-physical realm: it's about responding to God as whole people. Body and spirit belong together.

In our first reading this morning, Paul has two images in mind: the athlete and the boxer. We said last week how the city of Corinth was home to the Isthmian Games, which was a big athletics contest, like the Olympics. So Paul's readers would know what he was talking about. They'd be familiar with Greek athletes and boxers.

Paul talks about running to get the prize, and going into a strict training regime to make that a reality. So why does Paul talk about athletics competitions?

Well, the heart of what he's saying is simple: it's about endurance. He's saying if you want the glory, you've got to put in the hard work and exertion and self-discipline. For Paul, a good image for the life of faith is the athlete. It's about glory, but it's also about endurance, stickability, not giving up.

Now, if you look at the church where Paul was writing, it turns out that there's at least one reason why he needs to say that to them. The church in Corinth is a new church. Most of its members were recently converted from what we'd call paganism – ancient Greek temple religion. And one of the things that was expected in their culture was that everybody would take part in sacred meals in the temples, as an act of worship to the Greek gods.

So if you're a Christian in Corinth, you've got a dilemma. One of the main social events of your city is a community meal, but it takes place in the temple, as an act of pagan worship. Do you go or not? Well, lots of the Corinthian Christians were saying: 'It's no big deal. I don't worship Greek gods any more, I'll carry on going as a social thing.'

Paul says to these people: 'Because something's *possible* doesn't mean it's *beneficial*. Because you're free to do something doesn't mean you *ought* to do something.' In other words, if they're serious about their new faith, they've got to be as serious as an athlete. You've got to have a clear vision of what you're aiming for. And in the light of that, you've got to learn self-discipline and endurance. It doesn't come easy. An athlete *could* eat lots of Greek pies and cream cakes. But it's not going to help them win the prize.

And for Paul, the 'prize' is a relationship with God here and now, and then eternity with God. That's the biggest prize of all, the ultimate glory. And it's not hard to see how this might apply to us today. It's the same issues. Question: how important is my faith to me? Answer: it ought to be very, very important. Question: How does that affect my lifestyle choices? Answer: it ought to affect them hugely.

People often say things like: 'I don't have to go to church or do an Alpha Course to be a Christian.' And things like: 'I'm a Christian, but I don't feel the need to give money to church or charity, or spend time reading the Bible, or teaching my children how to pray.' And in one sense maybe they're right. They're free not to do these things. The Christian faith isn't a list of laws and rules.

So most people don't bother: 72% of people in this country say they're Christians, but 8% go to church; 25 million people in this country say they're members of the Church of England, but only about 1 million are in C of E churches on a Sunday. Does it matter? The answer to that has to be another question: 'Does it matter if an Olympic athlete trains by sitting in front of the TV with a pile of chocolate eclairs and a can of Budweiser?' Well, it matters if he actually wants to win a race! It's all about how much it matters to you.

What Paul would say is this: think about Olympic athletes. The ones who go on to win a prize need two things. They've got to be determined, and they've got to train. And the same is true of faith, it's just not going to work to say you're a Christian but be half-hearted about it, and have it make no difference to your life.

So as we watch the Olympics this week it's worth sparing a thought for what Paul says about athletes, as an illustration of the life of faith. No guts, no glory. No pain, no gain. No risk, no reward. At the end of the day, says Paul, how important is that crown of glory to you? And if it does matter, what are you going to do about it?

### **Part 3: Victory (Philippians 3:12-14, Matthew 6:19-24)**

We've reached the third part of our summer series on the Olympics, where we're highlighting links between faith, and what our Olympic athletes are currently up to in Beijing.

We've talked about a Christian basis for sport, in that God's creator of the human body, and God's ultimately the giver of our talents and abilities. We talked last week about the theme of Endurance, and how St Paul uses this theme of endurance among athletes to underline some vital spiritual truths.

This week we're thinking about Victory. Because the New Testament writers refer several times, explicitly, to the laurel wreath that athletes win in an Olympic event. Sometimes the word's translated 'crown', but the word they use means the laurel victory wreath in Greek athletic contests.

Paul talks about receiving a crown when Jesus returns to judge the earth (2 Tim 4:8), James talks about people standing firm in times of difficulty and persecution and receiving a crown of life (James 1:12). Peter talks about believers receiving a crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 5:4).

Of course, these are all using the image of the Olympic victor's crown as an illustration of something else: an eternal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And they're emphasizing that this is a crown that will last for ever, unlike the laurel wreath of the Olympic victor. Sporting triumph is a wonderful thing, but it's a fading glory.

Then you get lots of references to victory in the Bible. The Psalmist tells us that with God we'll gain the victory (Psalm 60:12). Paul says God gives us victory through our faith in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57). John says our faith gives us a victory over the world (1 John 5:4). What they're all talking about, of course, is God's ultimate victory of good over evil. They're talking about us sharing in that victory through our faith in Jesus.

And in our New Testament reading this morning, Paul takes the image of an athlete pressing on to a victory, straining to win the race. Again, he's using a sporting image to express a vital spiritual truth. That the journey of faith isn't a casual saunter, a stroll round the garden. A take-it-or-leave-it kind of thing.

Paul says: look at how these athletes train for the big race, and that's for the fading glory of a laurel wreath. How much more should we be focussed and disciplined and passionate about our faith. And Paul's thinking here in particular of disciplines like praying regularly to God and studying God's word in the Bible on a regular basis.

So the Bible writers use this image of victory as a spiritual metaphor, for God's ultimate victory of good over evil. And they use it to encourage the people they're writing to, to be focussed and passionate about their faith. They're saying: are you as passionate about your faith, as Steve Redgrave was about his Olympic ambitions? As passionate as Michael Phelps and Rebecca Adlington are about winning their gold medals in the swimming pool at this year's Olympics?

But there's another interesting issue when we're thinking about this theme of victory, and it's more a moral issue that faces Christians involved in sport. And it's this. Is there any conflict between developing a Christian character and a Christian lifestyle, and being competitive and driven to win?

One of Britain's greatest athletes of recent years is Kriss Akabusi, the hurdler. He's also a practising Christian. And he was once asked how he handles this whole issue. And what he said was interesting. That when he became a Christian he found he had a new motivation in life, but it didn't make him any less competitive. He said this:

'As far as competitiveness is concerned, I was competitive before I was a Christian, and I am extra competitive now that I am a Christian. I realized that my ability had been given to me by God and there's a verse in the Bible which says that we are not to bury our talents. I believe God has given me this gift so that I could express his glory within myself but also so that I can touch other people's lives. As a Christian I still want to win, but not at all costs. And if I cross the line second or third or worse, I don't have to kick the timing machine or look at someone else and feel angry with him. That's a small indication of what God has done for me over the past few years.'

I like that, because it's a helpful Christian approach to this whole issue. If you have a faith, you can still be totally competitive in the field of sport, or business or whatever. But as a Christian, you're also looking to God to shape your character and your responses to situations. And your faith can make a big difference to how you feel about winning and losing, and how you relate to other competitors. And of course, your faith has to affect the means you take to get the victory – not cheating or taking drugs or whatever.

I think St Paul would like that. Be as competitive as you can be. Aim for excellence in every area of life. But allow God to shape your priorities and your character at the same time. And at the end of the day, don't forget: the laurel wreath that matters most is one that never fades.

#### **Part 4: Teamwork (1 Corinthians 12:14-18, Matt 22:34-40)**

Last week, I quoted the athlete Kriss Akabusi. He was talking about how he handles the issue of being a Christian, as well as being competitive and driven, ambitious to win. And I've got another quotation from Kriss Akabusi this week. He likes to tell the story of how the British running team won a victory over the USA in the 1991 World Championships.

The American team were clear favourites for the 4 x 400m relay. In fact, if you looked at each of the British runners, all of them had an inferior track record to the Americans. The Americans were all superb runners in their own right. But the British team won. And Kriss Akabusi was reflecting on how they did it. His conclusion was simple: 'The whole was greater than the sum of the parts'.

Today we're thinking about teamwork, and what Kriss Akabusi said is a good definition of teamwork. It's when something's achieved by people working together that can't be achieved by one person going it alone. Or even by a team of people acting as individuals. Teamwork is where the combined efforts of different people produces a better result than the total of the skills of those individuals separately.

Clearly, that's often the case in the Olympics. There's something powerful and effective about harnessing different talents and abilities, and a group of people coming up with a shared strategy. So today we're thinking about this theme of teamwork and the Christian faith. And I want to do that under two headings: being a Christian at all, and then living the Christian life:

**1) Being a Christian at all.** Our Gospel reading is the words of Jesus, where he's saying that faith is about loving God (with all your heart, soul and mind), and loving your neighbour as yourself (in other words, the way you relate to other people). And of course, our vision statement here at HT is based on those same words of Jesus: 'Loving God, loving people'.

What that says is that faith is about *relationships*. Firstly, a relationship with a God who's really there, who isn't just a projection of my own imagination. So prayer, for example, is communication with One who is other than myself, not just me thinking my own thoughts. And it's about relationships with others. Especially people who share the same faith as me.

In the NT practically all the images of being a Christian are about being part of a group. St Paul talks about each of us being a part of a body. He talks about us as living stones that together build a temple. These are images of teams, rather than individuals. Whenever Paul uses the word 'you' in his letters, it's always plural. He's talking to the church, a body of people. And for Paul, being a Christian happens because you belong to what he calls the 'body of Christ', the church.

That's the opposite of how most people today define faith. For most people, it's about me making a personal decision to have faith. It's about me finding inner peace or purpose in my life. And if I then decide to go to church, that's my personal decision. And that's why so many people say: 'Well of course, I can be a Christian, without belonging to the church'.

But that's a very modern way of looking at faith, not something you find in the Bible. In the Old Testament (OT), you're a believer by belonging to God's covenant people. In the New Testament (NT) you're a believer by being part of the 'Body of Christ', the church. At no stage is faith a private or an individualistic thing. I once spoke to a businessman who said: 'a person's religious faith is their own private business'. Well, if that's the case, it's not the Christian faith.

If you said to St Paul 'I can be a Christian without belonging to the church', he'd say: 'What do you mean? Being a Christian by means being part of a body.' If you say you can be a Christian without being part of the church, that's like saying you're a severed toenail or an ear. These things aren't alive unless they're a part of a body.

**2) Living the Christian life:** We don't need to say as much about this one. If it's true that being a Christian centres on relating to God and other people; and if it's true that being a believer means being part of a body, then that has to affect how I live my life, and what I value and prioritise in life. It says a lot about prioritising a relationship with God, and my relationships with those people I share my life with.

But it also affects things like how I pursue my talents and skills. In the NT letters, there are lists of so-called gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to people. And if you read those lists of gifts, they're all about building up the body. Paul doesn't talk about the gift of fly-fishing or solitaire. He talks about gifts like hospitality, leadership, having words of insight for other people, and so on.

It's a whole new way of looking at our lives and our priorities: to order them not around personal success and personal fulfillment, but around relationship. It challenges so much of what we were brought up to believe, and what our society believes.

And you get a glimpse of what Jesus and Paul are talking about as you watch the best teams succeeding in the Olympics. Teams where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In other words, faith is a team-sport.