

Worship at Home Sheet for 4th August 2024

Call to worship:

‘Many runners take part in a race, but only one of them wins the prize. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and run in such a way as to win the prize of salvation, which will last for ever.’ Following the advice of Saint Paul, today we will be seeking to dedicate ourselves to focusing our lives on our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are right in the middle of the Olympic Games in Paris, which I am sure some of you have been watching, and you will probably have heard about its outstanding moments so far, as well as any medals for British competitors. What you may not know, is that while he spent time in Corinth, in Greece, during his second missionary journey, Saint Paul would have come across the Olympic Games. They were held every four years at Olympia, not very far from Corinth, which was also a location for the athletic competitions that were highly valued by the ancient Greeks. Not surprisingly, Paul made use of sporting illustrations in his teaching, which we shall explore. Winners received a crown of olive leaves, and our opening hymn refers to the everlasting crown of glory awarded to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

StF no. 312 *The head that once was crowned with thorns*

1 The head that once was crowned with
thorns
Is crowned with glory now;
A royal diadem adorns
The mighty Victor’s brow.

4 To them the cross, with all its
shame,
With all its grace is given,
Their name an everlasting name,
Their joy the joy of heaven.

2 The highest place that heaven affords
Is his, is his by right,
The King of kings and Lord of lords,
And heaven’s eternal light.

5 They suffer with their Lord below,
They reign with him above,
Their profit and their joy to know
The mystery of his love.

3 The joy of all who dwell above,
The joy of all below
To whom he manifests his love
And grants his name to know.

6 The cross he bore is life and health,
Though shame and death to him;
His people’s hope, his people’s wealth,
Their everlasting theme.

CCL821965 Thomas Kelly

Prayers of adoration and confession

God of the seasons, you surround us with beauty and wonder, both in the welcome summer sunshine, but also in the showers of refreshing rain. You invite us to let you into our lives, so that we may act justly and share fairly, loving you in friend and stranger all the days of our life. And to achieve this, you have empowered us with your Holy Spirit, so that we can persevere in the ways of righteousness, keeping our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, who has promised us the great prize of eternal life. We pray in his precious name. **Amen.**

Merciful God, we are extremely grateful that, unlike us, you do not dwell on our failures. Instead, you invite us to acknowledge them openly before you, in order to receive your pardon and then move on. Teach us to do just that, to accept your offer of grace, rather than wallowing in guilt. For you assure us that, once we turn to you, through the love of Jesus and the help of the Holy Spirit we can overcome our sins and become the people you want us to be. Freed from the past, we can look ahead with confidence. Bless your holy name. **Amen.**

Reading: 1 Corinthians 9: 23-27

²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

The Need for Self-Discipline

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Sermon

It was no accident that Saint Paul should write to the Corinthians using some sporting illustrations (though similar references appear in other letters). Not only was Corinth, where he lived for two years, not far from Olympia, where the original, famous games were held every four years and to which they gave a name, but Corinth also had its own games every two years in between. We have no evidence that he ever attended any of these ancient events as a spectator, but he must at least have been aware of them. Indeed, working as a tent-maker at the time, he may have made tents for those athletes from all over Greece, who arrived to compete in the games and stayed in a primitive Olympic village! The two activities of running and boxing that Paul mentions in this letter were among the few sports that comprised the games in those days – unlike the huge and expanding array of competitions in the modern Olympics, which were revived at the very end of the nineteenth century. This year break-dancing has been added to the list in an attempt to attract more interest from younger people.

Of course, Paul was using the Greeks' experience, and their passion for sports and athleticism, in order to offer some lessons about the Christian life to the Christian community he had established at Corinth, and to which he would later send a further epistle (2 Corinthians). In the ninth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, from which our passage today was taken, Paul was talking about the duties of an apostle, and in verse 19 he writes, 'I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many people as possible (for Christ).' Then at the start of our passage, he continues, 'All this I do for the Gospel's sake, in order to share in its blessings.' He then goes on to discuss the effort and perseverance that such a goal in life requires, drawing on sporting illustrations and the athlete's example, in an attempt to do so. What he says in this short passage is as important and relevant for Christians today, as it was for his Corinthian followers almost 2,000 years ago.

His first point is about running to win. In the Greek games, unlike the modern Olympics, with its gold, silver and bronze medals, there was only one winner among the many competitors. It took particular determination to finish in first place, and Saint Paul was

suggesting that similar single-mindedness is required of the Christian, if she or he wishes to win the prize of salvation. He also mentions keeping the finishing line in sight, for the Christian needs to keep this goal constantly in view. The athletes currently competing in Paris have been working towards these Olympic Games for the past four years! Likewise, there is no place for half-heartedness, for what the book of Revelation refers to as lukewarm Christians (who characterised the church of Laodicea), or our own John Wesley who criticised what he called the 'almost Christian', who cannot quite commit to Christ.

Secondly, Paul goes on to mention the discipline that is required in order to achieve the prize. We all know that the athletes who appear on our television screens have not just turned up to compete, like parents at a school sports-day. Instead, they have devoted themselves to physical fitness and to endlessly practising the skills that are required in their chosen sport. One Olympic rower talked about going out on the water at dawn, every day, whatever the weather, in winter as well as summer. How he wished he could have stayed in bed, but he knew that he needed that 'strict discipline' in order to have any chance of victory. I have always enjoyed playing different sports, and I have probably never had much skill, but I never liked training, preferring to simply turn up and play; not surprisingly, I never won any prizes ...

Thirdly, and finally, Saint Paul reminds his readers of the prize that the Christian will win for perseverance and preparation, in prayer, learning the scriptures and service to others. The single Greek athlete who won the race did not receive a medal, but rather a crown of olive leaves; in fact, when the games were held in Athens, in 2004, this ancient practice was briefly revived, along with the medals of the Modern Games. Such medals, of course, will last, but the wreath that Paul mentions would quickly wither. By contrast, the Christian's crown, of eternal life, will last for ever, which makes it all the more vital that we win this prize, rather than the fleeting fame that success in sport can bring.

A celebrated manager of Liverpool Football Club once joked that football was not just a matter of life and death, but more important than that! In fact, many athletes, like footballers, are Christians, well aware that what they do is 'only a game', even if these days it can bring them huge financial rewards. The outstanding example of this Christian approach to sport is furnished by Eric Liddell, whose faith was celebrated in the film *Chariots of Fire*. It was exactly 100 years ago, when the games were last held in Paris, in 1924, and Liddell discovered that the heats for his favoured 100 metres race would be held on a Sunday, so he competed in the 400 metres on a weekday instead – and still won gold! He then went to China, where he served as a missionary, until his untimely death in a Japanese internment camp in 1945. Eric was a winner in more ways than one, who knew how to run the race of life, and was indeed crowned with glory.

Prayers of Intercession

Dear Lord, we pray for those who have run for office, from the highest to the lowest level, and now exercise authority over your people. Many of them, like the members of our new government in Britain, have only recently been elected. So, we ask that they might be guided by justice and mercy, as they fulfil many thankless tasks on our behalf.

The Modern Olympic games were intended as an occasion when nations could be brought together to engage in friendly competition. Yet they are taking place at a time of

great conflict and violence, not least in Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, the Sudan, and other locations. We ask that your spirit of peace might come to prevail in all these places.

Then we would pray for who feel they are losing in the race of life, whose efforts seem to yield scant success. We think of those whose lives have been slowed down, or even halted, by infirmity or illness. We think of those who lack the strength, or will power to continue, because they are malnourished, weighed down by anxiety or afflicted by aimlessness. We think too of those whose life's course has been run, and those who mourn their passing. We pause to remember those in these situations who are known personally to us, asking that your love might bring them courage, fortitude and hope.

Finally, we pray for ourselves, and for all our fellow Christians, asking that we might find the commitment and discipline necessary to live out our calling. There are many distractions along the way, but we ask you to fill us with your spirit so that we never flag in following you. May your love build us up and bind us together. Let us never tire in running the race of life, for we seek to win an everlasting prize that far surpasses anything we can achieve on earth.

In the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, on whom we fix our gaze. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our second, and final hymn invites us to let Christ fill our lives, as we devote ourselves to him and the work to which he calls us. Note the final verse, which begins 'May I run the race before me ...'

StF no. 504 *May the mind of Christ my Saviour*

1 May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By his love and power controlling
All I do or say.

3 May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.

2 May the word of God dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph
Only through his power.

4 May the love of Jesus fill me,
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self-forgetting –
This is victory.

5 May I run the race before me,
Strong and brave to face the foe,
Looking only unto Jesus
As I onward go.

CCL 821956 Katie Barclay Wilkinson

Final Prayer

May we run the race of life, our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, for his salvation is the greatest prize that we can ever win. **Amen**

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. **Amen**

This worship service has been prepared by Dr. Malcolm Crook