

INSPIRE

→ The Olympic Games inspired lots of people up and down the land to get their running shoes on again or if not their running shoes, to at least get to the gym a little more frequently or do something about their less than healthy lifestyles! And during these recent days we have been subjected again to lots of scenes from the World Athletics Championships in Moscow where Mo Farrah and others have inspired us with their agility, their skill and their sheer determination.

.....Now I guess not too many of us would class ourselves as world class athletes but I know that there are some of you out there who are regular runners or keep fit enthusiasts and you will know how important it is to have the support and encouragement of others to help you stick at it and to keep going at those times when “the going gets tough!” Even the most gifted athletes in the Olympics and the World Championships talk about the difference that the crowd cheering them on can make to their performance. It helps them to run as if their life depended upon it!

..... Wouldn't it be amazing if every person who says that they are a follower of Jesus; every person who claims to be a Christian were to run the race of faith as if our lives depended on it? Because actually you know, our lives do depend upon it! But for some of us, the race hasn't even started because we've never taken seriously the challenge of living the way in which Jesus encourages us to live and for others of us, well we may have made that decision, but actually we haven't perhaps got very far off the starting blocks. We haven't grown in our faith, we don't tell other people about it much and we're not that keen on having to serve.

.....Then there are others of us who are much further down the track. We're keen, we're enthusiastic but we're maybe in danger of getting a bit weary, because the race of faith is certainly a marathon, not a sprint and so we need to pace ourselves and we need to persevere. Marathon runners talk about “hitting the wall” after about 20 miles and needing to find a way through that so that they keep going right to the end. On the journey of faith it's perfectly possible for us to “hit a wall” when life becomes a bit overwhelming – family crises, debt, bereavement – all sorts of things can happen that could throw us off track and encourage us to give up. But we need to keep going, because there are more laps to run and more miles to cover, but how do we do that; how do we persevere and how do we endure?

→ Well, let's go back to that passage of scripture that we heard just a few moments ago from the letter to the Hebrews; from the end of the chapter that we were looking at last week. Perhaps the first thing that we need to remember is that there are others who have successfully completed this race of life and faith long before us. We see that at the beginning of chapter twelve. The writer of this letter calls these people a “cloud of witnesses!” But who are they?

.....Well, at the beginning of chapter twelve the writer is referring back to all that has gone before in chapter eleven and those of you who were here last week will know that this chapter gives us an inspiring list of heroes of the faith from the Old Testament. These are people who ran the race of faith with integrity and with success; people like Noah who spent many years building the ark patiently waiting for the flood to come or Joseph who endured being sold into slavery by his own

brothers, was convicted of crimes he didn't commit and was thrown into prison, yet remained faithful.

.....So, when we are impatient or when life is tough we can think of folk like Noah or Joseph or plenty of others that are mentioned in that eleventh chapter because these are part of the great cloud of witnesses that are cheering us on and willing us to get to the finishing line.

.....But perhaps it's more helpful to think of the heroes of faith that we have known in our own lives. Those people who have had a real impact on us but who are no longer with us in person – a parent, a grandparent, a school teacher, a friend, someone from the church family – all of us will no doubt have at least one person that has encouraged us and inspired us and challenged us and spurred us on and even though they are no longer with us, having passed the baton to us, they still take an interest in whether we get to the finishing line or not. They are watching as we run the race of faith, they see our struggles, but they continue to cheer us on, just as the crowds in the Olympic stadium cheer on the athletes. So, when we are faced with struggles along the way, remember those that have gone before who continue to cheer us on now.

→ Secondly, we need to run with determination, remembering that this is a lifelong race, and there will be times when we don't feel as if we can carry on, but we need to carry on anyway. Back in 1986, the New York City Marathon had just under 20,000 runners who entered the race. But what is memorable about that race is not who won but who finished last. A man called Bob Wieland finished 19,413th with a time of 4 days, 2 hours, 47 minutes and 17 seconds. It was unquestionably the slowest marathon ever run, but it was remarkable. Why? Because Bob ran the marathon with his arms! Seventeen years before whilst in the Vietnam war both his legs had been blown off and so to achieve the marathon he sits on a saddle, covers his fists with cushioned pads and then uses his arms to catapult himself forward one arm length at a time. Now, that's what I call endurance. He finished the race, and if you listened carefully to the figures that I gave you, you will have noticed that about five hundred people didn't do that – they didn't cross the finishing line.

..... Listening to that story, makes the bit of discomfort that we might feel when we've been on the cross trainer or the rowing machine in the gym pale into insignificance doesn't it? But when we're on those machines and the clock is ticking down the seconds until we can get off, we try to distract ourselves with music on our iPods or we watch the TV screen on the other side of the gym or we visualise ourselves being several pounds lighter than we currently are in order to keep ourselves going.

.....And it's much the same with the race of faith. We need to find ways to keep us going in the race, but the writer of this letter warns us about distractions and tells us to get rid of everything that would get in the way of us finishing the race. It's very easy when we know that there's something that we really should be doing, for us to find ways of justifying not doing it. When there's study to be done, suddenly the housework or the gardening looks attractive. When we should be at the gym, we suddenly remember someone that we promised to call on. And notice that the distractions aren't usually bad things – in fact they're very good, but they get in the

way of what we are meant to be doing. If we are going to run the race of faith; if we're going to keep living life the way Jesus calls us to live, then we need to be incredibly determined.

→ But the good news is that we don't have to do all of this on our own. We are called to cheer one another on and encourage one another, but we are also encouraged to keep our focus on Jesus. Don't get distracted by thinking about yourself, or how you're feeling, or how tough things are, but focus on Jesus and think about where he might be leading you and what he might be wanting you to be or to do. Focus on what he did for you when he died on the cross so that you could know how much God loves you.

.....Jesus is our pioneer – he has lived this life before us and he has shown us what is possible. His life certainly wasn't without difficult moments and challenges so we certainly don't ever need to think that when things go wrong we are in some way being punished or that it's time to give up. In fact, quite the opposite is true. It's often by embracing the hardships that come our way that we are changed into more compassionate, more Christ-like human beings.

.....So, the writer of this letter to the Hebrews would say to us, as he said to his readers all those years ago, "Stay strong, don't give up, finish the race! Remember those that have gone before who still cheer you on. Be determined and keep your eyes on Jesus!" It's not the speed at which you run, or the style in which you run that matters, but it's the fact that you keep running the race of faith and that eventually you cross the finishing line. And maybe we'll discover that Jesus himself is the finishing line, because it's in his arms that we will find ourselves when the race of this life is over.

.....So, let us encourage one another, and maybe even carry one another sometimes so that all of us have the joy of crossing that finishing line and sharing eternity with all those that have faithfully run the race before us.