

Olympic challenge!

I suppose it is inevitable that the Olympics should come up on one Thursday breakfast during the Olympics.

Maybe you are not a fan of seeing all that money, effort, construction and travel spent on sport.

Maybe like Nicky and I, you get really excited at seeing excellence, surprising outcomes and the immense joy on the winners faces.

What about the losers? Did you see the faces of the Spanish girls after losing their hockey match against England; how crestfallen and pained they looked? Did you see the faces of the Chinese synchronized divers when they only got a bronze having had gold for previous Olympics? You could almost think they had signed their own death warrant.

Perhaps it's who we have our identity in. Wasn't it fantastic when the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was asked to comment on his reaction to finding out that his father wasn't his father! Indeed, from letters written by his widow, they alleged that Sir Winston Churchill's private secretary, the late Sir Anthony Montague Browne, was his paternal father. With a press scoop delight the papers challenged Justin Welby on his parenthood so he volunteered to take a DNA test; he took the appropriate mouth swabs and they compared his DNA with some hair on his alleged father's hairbrush. The result showed a 99.9779% probability that they were father and son.

His reply showed where his heart lay, where his treasure was when he said, on revelation of his true paternity, it had come as a complete surprise but he described it as a story of redemption and hope. He added, after the press tried to make a crisis of the revelation,

"There is no existential crisis, and no resentment against anyone as my identity is founded on who I am in Christ!"

In the same vein seeing and reading about the South African runner Wayde Van Niekerk, the American diving duo David Boudia and Steele Johnson and the Bahamian runner Shaunae Miller, it was uplifting and encouraging to who they put their identity in.

On being interviewed after winning Gold for the men's 400m race Wayde Van Niekerk glorified God saying "Jesus did it." He put his world record win down to tweeting "God is power!" He thanked God on the track after the race and told BBC Sport:

"I have dreamed of this since I was a little kid. The only thing I can do now is to give God praise. I went on my knees each and every day and I told the lord to take care of me and look after me every step. I asked the Lord to carry me through the race and I am really blessed for this opportunity."

He had previously told sports media organisation Passion for Sport that: "Everything that comes my way I thank the Lord." He said "I leave every race and every step I take in his hands, I trust him in every movement I do." Speaking of the importance of his faith he said he values it because. To quote Wayde accurately: "God is the one who blessed me with talent."

Like Justin Welby, he has no hesitation in acknowledging who his identity is founded on.

Another gold winner is Shaunie Miller who, after winning bent down, prayed and thanked God and on being interviewed immediately declared:

'I could not have done it without God!'

Lastly, Silver winners in the synchronised diving, David Boudia and Steele Johnson thanked Christ on national television.

The two were interviewed after their win and while Boudia said there was so much pressure on them, he spoke of how focusing on Christ got them through it. He went on to say:

“It’s just an identity crisis. When my mind is on diving and I’m thinking I’m defined by this, then my mind goes crazy. But we both know that our identity is in Christ, and we’re thankful for this opportunity to be able to dive in front of Brazil and in front of the United States. It’s been absolutely thrilling moment for us,” he told NBC.

Steele Johnson said Christ gave him peace through this competition.

He continued by saying “The way David just described it was flawless – the fact that I was going into this event knowing that my identity is rooted in Christ and not what the result of this competition is just gave me peace.....and it let me enjoy the contest”.

He added “if something went great, I was happy. If something didn’t go great, I could still find my joy because I’m at the Olympics competing with the best person, the best mentor – just one of the best people to be around. Gods given us a cool opportunity and I’m glad I could come away with an Olympic silver medal in my first ever event.”

In his book “Greater than Gold,” Boudia writes about how he changed his focus from winning for himself to giving glory to God!

What I love about these Thursday morning breakfasts is being surrounded by winners!

Most of you know and recognise Jesus for who he is as. Thomas became a winner when he too finally realized who Jesus is when, as recorded in John 20:27, Jesus says:

“Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas’s gives us a wonderfully affirming reply when he says

“My Lord and My God!” Jesus accepts Thomas worship therefore revealing to us he is God.

In verse 29 Jesus told him

“Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.”

Isn’t that amazing; Jesus is speaking about you, me, and all our bother’s and sisters throughout the world.

It goes on to say in verse 30-31

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

In my bible I put a note that this is what motivated John to write his gospel.

What motivates you to speak and share the gospel!?

Seeing Jesus act in our own lives I hope will encourage you also to record and share your testimony, and like some of the Olympians have been done so publicly, share where your power comes from, what motivates you.

It was particularly refreshing that BBC didn't cut Wayde Van Niekerk off in midsentence when he gave his interview giving all the glory to Jesus.

Unlike an interview I gave earlier this week on BBC radio Devon; as soon as I mentioned God's order and how we are given dominion over the animals the chap stopped the interview saying... "Well we don't want to go down that line!!"

Going back on the Olympic theme all who follow Jesus or followers of the way will, like the winning athletes in Jesus's day, be given crowns of victory. Indeed you can expect five heavenly crowns mentioned in the New Testament that are awarded to believers. They are,

The imperishable crown

The crown of rejoicing

The crown of righteousness

The crown of glory

And the Crown of life!

In Jesus's time a crown referred to the wreath or garland placed on a victor's head as a reward for winning an athletic contest. In the New Testament the word crown is used figuratively as rewards in heaven God promises those who are faithful. Paul's passage in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 best defines for us how these crowns are awarded.

In some ways I find this disconcerting as a passage partly as I was never very athletic therefore winning races wasn't something I aspired to or achieved however, digging deeper I can see what Paul is alluding to. Winning a race requires purpose and discipline.

Those Olympians spent years and years building up to compete, they spend hours and hours training, they take special diets, self-denial and rigidly adhere to a rigorous discipline not just physically but also mentally and in the cases of Wayde, David, Steele and Shaunie also spiritually.

Paul's example in verses 24-27 uses this illustration to explain that the Christian life takes hard work, self-denial and gruelling preparation. When first reading this as someone who wanted to follow the way it made being a Christian look rather unappetising and perhaps too difficult. In truth it could be but with fellowship, just as we have each Thursday, the discipline of prayer, Bible study, and worship we are equipped to run with vigour and stamina. Don't be a couch potato and stay in the grandstand, don't just jog a couple of laps each morning, we are told to train diligently; our spiritual progress depends on it.

In verse 25 Paul tells us emphatically, and remember Paul had a very personal anointing from Jesus himself so strong he turned from being a persecutor to a persecuted, but he emphatically tells us that we get an imperishable crown he points out that

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! An imperishable crown!

At times we might be asked to give up something good in order to do what God wants. Each of us has special duties that determine the discipline and denial that we must accept. Without a goal, discipline is nothing but self-punishment. With the goal of pleasing God, our denial seems like nothing compared to the eternal, imperishable crown that will be ours.

In verse 27 when Paul says he might be disqualified, he doesn't mean that he could lose his salvation, but rather that he could lose his privilege of telling others about Christ.

Some of you may remember a wonderful New Zealand evangelist Roy Waldron who preached here several times. His great message was on judgementalism. It is easy to tell others how to live and then not take our own advice. We must be careful to practice what we preach otherwise we will fall into the trap of the religious leaders in Jesus's day and as Ed often reminded us, we know what Jesus thought of them. So enjoy running the race as Paul did knowing that even if you flag on the way you are still saved ...that's a promise from Jesus himself as mentioned earlier in John's Gospel 20:30-31. Believe in him and you will have Life in His name.

You may recall the film Chariots of Fire and the race between Abrahams and Eric Liddle. Liddle, refused to race on the Sabbath so forfeited a race, the 100 metres that was almost a dead cert win for him, especially as he set a British record of 9.3 seconds for this distance that remained unbroken for 23 years! However, he competed in the 400 metre race a distance that really was not one he would have expected to win; God honoured Eric Liddle and affirmed on a world stage Liddle's faith and trust in Him. Liddle won. Not only did he win the 400 metre but he also came third in the 200 metre race also. Incidentally Liddle's time for the 400 meter race in the 1924 games remained unbeaten until the Berlin Olympics in 1936.

Having been a successful graduate and successful Olympian Liddle could have dropped into a wonderfully lucrative career in sports; instead he joined the China Mission in a China that was lethal especially for missionaries who were regularly murdered. China was riven with different factions striving for power, earthly power. There was the government, War lords, guerrilla groups, bandits and finally the invading Japanese. Liddle survived all this until finally he was imprisoned by the Japanese. I heard recently some interviews with people who were children in the camp with Liddle. They all testify to what a lovely, nice, kind and smiling man he was even in adversity. One of his fellow prisoners said he was too nice he bore no grudge or lament for his situation. He became a leader and organiser in the camp, he also ran bible studies, preached the gospel and encouraged fellow internees to follow our Lord Jesus's instructions to pray for our enemies so he prayed for the Japanese. Finally, in a faith filled surety of where he was going he sacrificed his own life ...to quote Jesus..."For the least of these". He refused to leave the camp when given the opportunity to on a prisoner exchange agreement; instead he gave his place to a pregnant woman.

Eric Liddle lived and died Corinthians 9: v 26-27 " Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

The Crown of Rejoicing we find in 1Thessalonians 2:19.

"For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed you are our glory and joy."

What a wonderful affirming, encouraging statement!

In the same Olympic theme of winning the Crown of Righteousness is in 2 Timothy 4:8

‘Now there is a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day....and not only me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing!’

How wonderful is that, what fantastic encouragement to keep on whatever life throws at us; we are promised that your reward is with Christ in heaven. Remember that all the disciples, except John, experienced huge persecution and untimely unpleasant death; the gospel truth that Jesus entrusted them with cost them dearly, they turned everything upside down just as our Lord did; winners looked like losers and in many peoples eyes they are as in 1 Corinthians 18

‘The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.’

In 2 Timothy 4:8 we find record of The Crown of Righteousness.

Finally there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing.

While the Crown of Glory is promised in 1 Peter 5:4

And when the chief Shepherd appears you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

Finally as Gold winning Olympian for Jesus and the Gospel he encourages to live and share we are promised The Crown of Life in Revelation 2:10

‘Do not fear any of these things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.’

Like the wonderful Christian Olympic winners may we all be sure of who we have our identity in, keep up our training with bible reading, prayer, fellowship and worship so that we to, if tested may have the stamina and vigour to keep going until we are called home and experience the victors imperishable crowns of Rejoicing, righteousness, glory and life and , as recorded in 1 John 5-3.

‘As his children we must keep his commandments, obeying him, always remaining faithful. So, as we endure the inevitable trials, pains, heartaches and tribulations – as long as we live- may we ever move forward, always looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Then in Hebrews 12:2 and receive the crown of life that awaits us.’

I hope you enjoy the rest of the Olympics and being fellow faithful Olympians with our identity firmly in Jesus our own winning Olympic life is crowned with, more than gold! We are winners and we’ve signed our own life warrant; like the hockey girls be brave – spread the gospel in Jesus’s name. Winning is infectious, delightfully contagious.