

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday after Trinity – Olympic Day

23rd June 2024

All Saints' Marseille

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'Citius! Altius! Fortius!' – Faster! Higher! Stronger! In just over a month, we will hear again these inspiring exhortations, as we immerse ourselves in the glory and excitement of the Olympics - a celebration of human potential, perseverance and fair play.

More than 10,000 athletes from around the world and all walks of life will compete in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. They will give their all to represent their countries with dignity, hoping to win medals and become champions. Those who journey alongside the athletes - coaches, staff, families, friends, and supporters - will share in their joys and in their disappointments, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. For a few moments, we will all become part of something much larger than our individual lives and concerns.

However, in the athletes' quest for excellence, true victory is not defined by physical prowess or medals. As we witness their exploits, we will also see their commitment to embodying integrity, courage, respect, and friendship – the values upon which the modern Olympic movement was founded, with its aspiration to bring greater peace among peoples and to build a better world.

In 1992, the ancient tradition of the Olympic truce was revived - a period when the host state is not attacked, allowing athletes and spectators to travel safely and peacefully. I hope and pray that this year the solemn appeal for truce will be observed both individually and collectively across the world, that we will have a time when 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (Isaiah 2.4). We all know that, in these difficult times, the Olympic Truce is more relevant than ever. It can send an unequivocal signal to the whole world: yes, we can be united, even in times of war and crisis. Yes, we can work together for a better future.

‘There is more that unites us than divides us’; ‘develop harmony’; ‘demonstrate respect’; ‘practise a spirit of friendship and solidarity’ – there is so much in the Olympic Charter that resonates deeply with the Gospel. It is not surprising, then, to hear Paul use the imagery of an athlete as a prototype or our own Christian journey: ‘Do you not know,’ he wrote to the community in Corinth, ‘that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.’ Paul was very likely familiar with the Isthmian Games, held every other year just outside the city of Corinth. These games attracted athletes from distant parts, and the victor’s prize was ‘a perishable garland’, a pine wreath in Paul’s time.

Paul saw in the discipline and competition of these games a fitting model for Christian discipleship, which he likened to a race to be run, a fight to be fought, with the goal of receiving the imperishable crown of everlasting life. He encouraged the Corinthians to live a voluntary and determined life of discipleship.

Paul was right: who could fail to be inspired by the athletes? Their dedication, hard work, enthusiasm are always palpable. They know the cost of reaching their goals, take nothing for granted and are prepared to work hard to achieve them. Similarly, the journey of faith, like the road to the Olympic Games or any athletic achievement, requires determination, high standards for oneself, endurance in the face of challenges, perseverance in practising love for one’s neighbour, and rigorous training on the path of justice and peace. We can’t live our Christian faith vicariously, Paul says. We aren’t spectators here; we are participants who should strive to do our best.

The desire to be the greatest, and to compete against the greatest, surely motivates many athletes. Some champions will be asked by interviewers: ‘How does it feel to be the greatest in the world? What does it take to be the greatest in your discipline?’ In today’s Gospel reading, we find the disciples arguing about who among them is the greatest. This is a familiar scene to many of us, isn’t it? Whether in sports, academics, or our careers, the desire to be recognized as the best often drives our actions. Despite walking closely with Jesus, the disciples, were not immune to this human tendency. Yet Jesus has a different take on greatness. The advice he gave his disciples turned - as ever - the world’s thinking upside down: ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ In the kingdom of God, greatness is not measured by our achievements, titles, or recognition. True greatness is measured by our willingness to serve and our humility in doing so.

If you ask me what my favourite virtue to witness in sports is, I will say without any hesitation that it is humility. We live in a look-at-me culture, where many, whether in the sports arena or everyday life, crave attention and fame and have a real drive to be in the spotlight. That is what makes the most humble sports heroes unique - people whose best work is done in silence, whose relentless pursuit of excellence is a quiet one, for whom teamwork is of paramount importance, and whom the accolades of success do not change.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned Eric Lidell, the Scottish Christian athlete described as someone entirely without vanity. His short life is remembered for his accomplishments in many different ways. There is, of course, the gold medal he won in the 400 metres at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. At the Games, he was held in respect because “what he has thought it right to do, that he has done, looking neither to the left nor the right, and yielding not one jot or tittle of principle either to court applause or to placate criticism.” But there is much more to his story than his sports achievements. Some of you may already know about his missionary service in China, his work as a teacher and sports trainer, and his death while imprisoned during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Even in this difficult situation, it is said that he remained hopeful and continued to communicate his optimism to the campmates. An Olympic champion who chose to live a life of compassionate and generous service, Liddell embodied humility, aware that God is the author of all good – a belief that surely guided his actions.

One of my hopes for this year’s Games is that they will surprise us not only with the quality of the spectacle and the number of records set, but also with the message that it is possible to compete fiercely, while embodying respect and friendship, and that true greatness lies in being humble and generous in service.

Last autumn, during the Rugby World Cup, my highlight was a very special moment when, after a bruising match, the teams of South Africa and Tonga gathered together in a circle on the field, held on to each other, knelt down, and prayed together. That’s the beauty of sports and the importance of the Olympics: they can bring people together, always building bridges and never erecting walls.

As we prepare to welcome the Olympic events here in France, and in our city of Marseille, may they rekindle in each of us a passion for goodness and righteousness, renewing our commitment to spread the light of hope and peace to those around us. May the God of peace guide us on this path.

Amen.