

Pentecost 13 – 10.30am Wesley – 14th August 2016

Theme: “Run the race for Christ”

Reading: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Text: “Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus....” Hebrews 12:1-2a

Introduction

We can't get away from the fact that the Olympics are happening in Rio. We are bombarded with it through the media whether it be on TV, in newspapers, online and even simply in our daily discussions with people around the place. It is literally in our face. The Australians already have had some amazing medal wins but also there have been those for which it has been a personal disappointment. The highs and the lows of competitive sport is quite challenging for the individuals, teams, coaches and countries involved and the politics is also incredible as we have seen with Russia, for example.

With all this Olympic hype I was pleased to read in the epistle from Hebrews 12 for today, this sporting imagery ‘let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us’ as part of the reading. Even so long ago the people were sporting mad and had arenas where their sports were held. In the Olympic tradition in Greece, there remains the remnants of the stadium in old Olympia where the traditions originated for the Olympics. I have had the privilege of seeing them and at this time it is wonderful to reflect upon the past. These games tradition come into our Christian tradition through passages like the one we have today and the people would have understood this imagery as we do to this very day. Quite amazing! So let us look at the set Hebrews reading.

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

Last Sunday we looked at the beginning of Hebrews 11 which talked about faith and we centred our thoughts around the section of that passage which reads: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.”

Paul, in writing this letter to the little emerging faith community in Crete, introduced the idea of faith as the courage to endure, in an effort to stiffen and strengthen their faith as they faced hostility and ridicule from those around them. Paul has suggested to them that faith can only be understood fully in terms of the larger story of promise reaching back to the ancient ancestors such as Abraham, who were themselves strangers and pilgrims even in the land of promise. The promise seems elusive, not easily identifiable with anything specific in the lives of Christians, but never the less present in the form of hope, which enables one to live as a stranger in the midst of a hostile culture, reaching for what cannot yet be fully grasped. What is striking in this passage, especially in verses 29-38, is the fact that faith seems strangely ambiguous. It may lead, on the one hand, to amazing results, such as successfully crossing the Red Sea and the fall of Jericho, but it may on the other hand, point simply to courageous endurance with persecution and torture. The reality of faith cannot be recognized by empirical observation but often is only seen in hindsight.

Paul uses the ancient faith stories to be an encouragement to the believers in Crete who were discouraged and demoralised. They felt excluded from the mainstream of society and felt political pressure from the Jewish religious establishment. Hebrews 11:29-12:2 then sets forth a vision for the church based on the faith of the forefathers but now having the example of Christ to follow. Here is the hope, here is the direction to follow and here is the one to follow. It is in faith revealed, that allows people to see beyond what is right in front of them, their daily problems, to see what God is doing in their midst, to see what God has done throughout the ages and to see the future joy God has in store for us.

Reflection for ourselves

It is not always easy being a Christian in today's world. Defining our beliefs and having our Christian faith challenged or compromised in the workplace and in social settings is not easy to deal with. Family, friends and colleagues may well not understand our faith stance. We see a lot of discouragement within our churches today. Mainline Protestant attendance continues to decline and it will be interesting to see the results of the Census we filled in this week to see where the Uniting Church affiliation numbers are within the country. Our everyday challenges can be discouraging. Sometimes as I look out at worship numbers, particularly in winter, I think 'where are all our people?' I feel that discouragement as well. However, this past week I reported to our Joint Church Council some of the encouraging signs around our Parish and I share some of those and others with you:

- A small group has taken over the stamp ministry work that the late Noel Tarbotton and Jan had done for years. This is flourishing on a Tuesday morning along with the Coffee, Craft and Chat group also offering to do this as an activity once a month
- Our KUCA group for primary aged children has recommenced with 11 children being present at the first night this term. Last night the number had grown to 15. While we still are praying for a co-ordinator, the group has begun with more children than when it went into recess
- The Men's Shed with both its Tuesday speaking meetings as well as the woodworking shop continues to grow and meet a real need
- The new Women's Fellowship Group has begun and is meeting a very positive need in that area
- The Whippersnappers Playgroup continues to meet a great need with lots of children with parents/caregivers attending. Leanne McKean is planning a mum's retreat down the coast for some of the young mums late in October. This is a new initiative and we pray for Leanne as she organises this.
- Having Alistair Buchanan as our Children's/Youth Ministry worker has added impetus into our ministry in these areas since he has begun with us earlier this year
- The office staff are working incredibly well and meeting a host of needs within the life of the parish. Recently they gave me initial figures that we have up to 130 people volunteering in some role or other within the life of the parish – that is quite remarkable. This covers all aspects of the parish.
- The Wesley Music Centre continues to offer amazing concerts and various other opportunities to enhance the music life of the parish and we have our Wesley Music Scholars that add to the music in our worship, which is wonderful

- The ministry of hospitality offered through our morning teas and also specifically after functions, particularly funerals, that are organised primarily by Helen Palmer and Helen Grant, have amazed many and been a great encouragement in the care we offer as a Parish
- I have had a number of people thank me and mention a variety of names when talking of the pastoral care they have received from people within the parish when they have been in need
- The Thursday Friendship Group also fulfils a wonderful ministry to those who find it a little harder to get out regularly. This group continues to meet a real need for some of our older people and has a wonderful group that prepare food and offer leadership under Ann Sutton's guidance.

These are the things in front of us that sometimes we fail to see and we should take encouragement from these things. There are more and this is simply a sample that I share with you.

Suddenly the words of my text, from Hebrews 12:1-2a, become a reality here and now and challenge us in our Christian race to focus our eyes on Jesus:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus....”

May we take this text with us into the week ahead and as we watch the Olympics be reminded about our own Christian faith and the race we are called to run with our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus. Amen.