

Sermon by Canon Neil Russell 14th August 2016 at Ingleton

In today's New Testament lesson, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to persevere in our life of faith, no matter what difficulties we face. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." The writer says, 'you have started well well in becoming Christians. I want you to finish strong in what has been started in you.'

Sport is an activity we can all take part in. That doesn't mean we're unlikely to become an Andy Murray or Tom Daley but there is a sport and a level of that

sport where we can achieve our potential. We are seeing some remarkable achievements in Rio. The story of, swimmer Adam Peaty is one such story. Adam won the gold medal in the 100m breaststroke in Rio last week, breaking his own world records as he did so. When he was at school his mother sent him for swimming lessons because his performance was so poor at a swimming gala. To reach the point of being world champion Adam, like other successful athletes, has dedicated himself totally to his sport, focussed on where he wants to be, and achieved his ambition.

The marathon is perhaps the most iconic of the events. Anyone can run a marathon. In the London marathon and the North East marathon, world champions run alongside ordinary people taking the day off to fulfil an ambition or to raise money for a charity. They all run the same course, the only difference being the time when they cross the finishing line. Running a marathon gives everyone the opportunity to share in the same race.

But it's the finishing that really makes the difference. The elite runners are crossing the finish line when others are only about half way through the course. But the beauty of the event is that, for many, just finishing the race is the accomplishment, the goal. participation in the event is for fun.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews asks us a similar question: Will we finish the race that is our life with faith? Will we persevere? Or will we run off course, or give up? And the race is hard. In today's gospel, Jesus tells us, if we follow him, if we stand up for what is right, we will experience conflict.

The writer of Hebrews, like a good coach, gives four pieces of advice about how to finish the race:

recall who surrounds us.

Remove what weighs heavily on us.

Rely on strength within us.

Remember who goes before us.

Recall who surrounds us: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” The writer wants us to picture ourselves as athletes in a stadium. As we strive towards our goal, to finish with faith we run surrounded by people. The people in the stands are people who have demonstrated faith — faith that persevered, people who by the grace of God overcame great obstacles, and finished the race. These are people of the Bible, the men and women of the Church throughout the ages, people known personally by you and by me whose witness encourages us.

They are witnesses, not just spectators. There is a huge difference. A spectator watches you go through something. A witness is someone who has gone through something herself, and the root meaning of the word witness, from which we get the word “martyr,” is someone who may have given his life going through it. We have witnesses cheering us on, not just spectators, people who have gone through what we struggle with, people whose testimonies of the strength God gave them can, in turn, give us strength and courage. We have witnesses cheering us in, weeping with us when we, stumble, calling to us when we wander, urging us to finish the race.

Our coach tells us also to remove what weighs down on us. “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,” says our coach. What attitudes and actions, weights of brokenness do we carry that cause us to stumble rather than sprint? We can set those weights down. God is ready to take them from us. God is ready to forgive and heal whatever we let get between us and God, whatever has come between us and other people, whatever wrongs we do to ourselves.

Our coach also tells us to rely on the strength within us. We are told to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” When the going gets tough, when the road is difficult, when the miles drag on, obstacles come up around every bend, when every stretch of the road seems like another steep hill to climb, we can rely on spiritual resources within us — spiritual resources we develop in gathering with other Christians, in hearing and reading God’s word, in participating in the sacramental life of the church.

The word “perseverance” can also be translated as “patient endurance.” Endurance is one thing. We can endure and whine and complain all at the same time. Patient endurance looks like praying without ceasing for ourselves and others. It looks like encouraging others even in the midst of difficulty. It looks like saying something kind, or saying nothing at all when something unkind comes more readily to mind. It looks like giving of ourselves generously, even when we’re not sure what’s ahead of us and our inclination may be to think of ourselves first.

Most important of all, remember who goes before us. We can look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the

joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

We can and will finish the race strong in faith if we look to Jesus, if we keep our eyes focused on him, not being distracted by other things along the way that can cause us to lose our direction or footing and stumble. Jesus has gone before us, has shown us the way that leads to victory. If we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow him, we will not only make a good beginning in faith we too will finish and win the race.

In the race of our life, we have people cheering us on. We have someone willing to take on our burdens. We can train for patient endurance. We have a guide who leads us and will not leave us.