

Well we are still basking in the after glow of the Olympics and looking forward to the start of the Paralympics. There were so many good things that happened during the course of the Olympics and so much good news was highlighted that the bad things, the failures, mostly went unnoticed. One such was the men's 4x100 metres race in which we again failed to get the baton round properly and the last hand over went horribly wrong. I mention this because what we have in 2 Timothy is the Apostle Paul in effect handing over the baton of gospel ministry to "Timothy my dear son" (2 Tim 1:2).

We should not miss that what is happening through this letter is that Paul is

1. Passing on the baton v6

The whole of the letter is an encouragement to Timothy fulfil the ministry to which he had been called irrespective of the difficulties and opposition he must face and the reason for this is that Paul's race is just about run. He has as it were done his leg of the race and is now passing on the baton to Timothy. So he says, "do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure." (2 Tim 4:5&6)

Timothy fulfil your ministry because my time is up. Paul knew that his life was drawing to an end. He was at this point in prison in Rome and he could see the way things were going. He used two images there to describe this fact. The first sees his life being offered like a drink offering to a god. In other words his blood, his life, was being gladly offered to God. The second is the image of departure or of a ship loosing its moorings as it sets out for another shore. The whole is saying, Timothy my death is at hand so to you comes the increased responsibility for the ministry of the gospel. Paul was passing on the baton.

One of the privileges of a role such as that I have been blessed with over the years is that of working with many people and being part of their spiritual growth and development so that I can feel that here and there I have handed on the baton. Often it may have been just one small sentence part of a much larger message that people remember years later but the impact has helped them stay true to Jesus and to the gospel.

Out of this two things come to me that apply to all of us.

a. encouragement for our teachers – we need to continue to encourage those who lead and teach in our churches to stay true to the gospel message and to preach the gospel as God's word of truth. We must not be those who have "itching ears" nor must we encourage our teachers to preach anything other than the truth from God's word. We encourage our preachers and teachers by

thanking them for the message, by opening the Bible as the sermon is preached, by taking notes, by questioning what is said to make sure we are preaching the truth.

b. encouragement of each other – in one sense we are all involved in passing on the baton. For all of us our lives are finite and we all have the opportunity to encourage those who are younger in the faith to continue walking the way of Jesus. We do that in our homegroups. We do it in our services and at coffee afterwards. We do it in prayer for our church and for its continued growth and development. Passing on the baton is not just for those who stand up here it is a ministry for all of us.

As I said Paul had a sense of urgency in passing on the baton because he knew that

2. The race was run v7

Alongside the two images for his death in v6 we now in v7 get three further images to say that, while death may be staring him in the face, he was not seeing that as a defeat but rather the natural completion of his life. These words are so well known to many of us and especially through that hymn we have just sung.

a. I have fought the good fight. In 1 Tim 6:12 Paul had encourage Timothy to “Fight the good fight of the faith” and here Paul is saying he has done that. Throughout his life following Jesus he had faced difficulty and opposition from within and from outside. He saw it very much as a spiritual battle as he said to the Christians in Ephesus “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). As we run the race of our Christians lives we should not be surprised that at times it is hard because there is a battle going on and the devil is out to stop us running and to put us out of the race. You often see athletes in some of the running races tripping over. It puts them out of the race. However, usually that is an accident whereas for us as Christians the devil is deliberately seeking to put us out of the race. So we do need to be on our guard as we run.

b. I have finished the race. Paul had as it were run the course. He’d done his leg. His life and ministry were coming to an end. He’d not dropped out half way but instead, as he sat there in that prison cell awaiting death, he knew that he had persevered right to the end.

c. I have kept the faith. It is interesting how often that expression is used – keep the faith, often as in keep believing in a cause. But here I think Paul is actually speaking about how he has been faithful. He had been faithful to his calling and especially to his calling as an apostle to the gentiles. So in turn he called Timothy to be faithful to his calling, “I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim 1:6).

In addition he had been faithful to the gospel, “of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am.” (2 Tim 1:11-12) Paul knew the power of the gospel but he also knew that importance of holding that gospel complete and unpolluted and he had done that and encouraged Timothy to “guard the good deposit”.

The whole speaks of Paul’s faithfulness. There may well along the way have been times when he might have given up but he hadn’t. He had run the race to the end.

It does speak to us of perseverance. We know that the Christian race is a marathon not a sprint.

Some of us here have been running the race for many years and we need this example of Paul to encourage us to keep going to the end. As he finished his race, as he finished his leg before handing on the baton so may we. The writer to the Hebrews spoke of the cloud of witness of who Paul is one to who we should look for the example of faithful lives lived out as an encouragement to us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us”. Are we doing that? Are we running with perseverance? Are you keeping on going? Last week at 10.30 we saw an interview with Tracey Grigoleit. She told us how she had run the London Marathon. It had not been easy and at times she had felt like giving up but with encouragement of spectators and from other runners she had persevered and run the race. So keep on going. Keep on running because as I say this passage is about faithfulness.

Paul was passing on the baton to Timothy and looking to him to be faithful as Paul had been. In our own day that baton has been passed to us so as we look at these words do they describe how we are running the race and our faithfulness?

Paul was encouraging Timothy and us to continue faithful to the end.

Faithful to our calling as followers of Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews encouraged the readers to run with perseverance with their eyes fixed on Jesus. If we are his followers that is what we are and that is what defines us and we should seek to be faithful to that calling in our words and actions.

Faithful to the ministries he has called us to. Our ministry whatever it is may not be like Paul’s but God has called us to it. We are called to be faithful in discharging that ministry to the end.

Faithful to the gospel as we hold out the gospel to others but also as we seek to keep the gospel intact and unpolluted so we hand it on to the next generation as it was handed on to us.

Friends we are called to run the race to the end. We are called and encouraged by Paul to be faithful in all things to the end of our race.

Paul had been faithful right up to the end and he knew that he now faced that end but he also was confident that

3. There is a crown v8

The crown was the symbol of victory as the winner in the games was given the laurel crown as a symbol of victory. For Paul all that lay ahead at this point was that crown of righteousness, that is the fullness of his salvation. As he had been made righteous in Christ so ultimately, having run the race, he would receive the crown of righteousness. But not only Paul because that crown is there for "all who have longed for his appearing" that is for all who accept the Lordship of Jesus and are waiting for his return. To all such the righteous Judge, Jesus, will give the crown of righteousness. This is the climax of the race when we cross the finishing line. This is God's big promise to his people. "O Jesus, Thou hast promised to all who follow thee that where Thou art in glory there shall Thy servant be".

Friends we like Paul and like Timothy need to trust this promise of God. The race is hard and often our path may seem steep but across the finish line there is more for us than the bottle of water, a space blanket and a medal that those who finish the London marathon get. For us there is the crown, there is eternity in the presence of our God. There is joy and peace and life for all eternity and there is Jesus. So let us run our race to the end.

In a sense the crown brings us full circle because we began this little series in 1 Cor 9 where Paul said, "we do it (that is run the race) to get a crown that will last forever." (1 Cor 9:25), which is appropriate because often races such as the 400 metres end where they began.

We come back to the main sentence through this series, "Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Cor 9:24).

If we are to do that as we have seen we need our training through the Bible, prayer, service and fellowship which equips us to run. We need to lay aside the things which stop us running effectively, our sin but also the many excuses we make for not reading our Bible praying etc. Then we need to press on to be moving forward as followers of Jesus Christ recognising the goal of becoming like him but recognising that we can't do it in our own strength and we do need to wait upon or hope in God, to trust him especially at difficult times and not rely on our own strength. And we should remember that there is for us glory at the end and a crown of righteousness.

So friends as we draw this series to a close let me simply leave with us this encouragement from Paul which so well fits this Olympic period, "Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Cor 9:24).