

Olympic Athletes & Christian Saints

A Sermon For St Bartholomew's Day 2008 (24th August)

(Isaiah 43 vv 8-13 p728, Psalm 145 vv 1-7, Acts 5 vv 12-16 p1097, 1 Corinthians 4 vv 9-15 p1146, Luke 22 vv 24-30 p1058)

We seem to need heroes and the successes of our Olympic athletes over the last couple of weeks have certainly lifted the nation's spirits and made us proud. It happens that today, the day of the Closing Ceremony in Beijing, is also the Feast of St Bartholomew and I was very tempted to say this morning that the saints for the Church are the Christian version of Olympic gold medallists, but I would have been wrong. There are, of course, analogies between top saints and top athletes but there are also a lot of important differences.

St Paul makes a comparison between Christians and the athletes of his own day. They train. They subdue the body. They strive to the utmost. But there are two important distinctions. Only one competitor in the race can win the gold medal, but all Christians can make it to Heaven. What is more, the prize the fastest runner wins is only a gold medal or, in Paul's day, a wreath made of some evergreen leaves, but eternity is for ever.

So that was my second point and my first one. Succeeding as a Christian is infinitely more important than succeeding as an athlete or a sportsman (or indeed as anything else) – and I do mean infinitely. Secondly, success as a Christian is possible for everyone. We add the word "saint" to the names of certain prominent Christians, but all Christians are called to be saints and that goes for you and me as much as for the famous people who finish up with their pictures in stained glass and a special day in the calendar on which to remember them.

Thirdly, we human beings seem to be quite keen on hierarchies of importance. There are people we look down on and people we look up to. God doesn't see things like that. In one sense, God looks down on everyone, but He also cherishes infinitely each one of us and, in the person of Jesus Christ, He became the lowest of the low and died the most humiliating death. If, as Christians, we are called to positions of importance, Jesus says that we should be humble and regard our importance as an opportunity to serve other people, not to bathe in their adulation and to grow rich at their expense.

Fourthly, the success of our top sportsmen and women can inspire other, more ordinary, people to take up sports. In the same way, we look to the named saints for an example and we look to their fellowship to assist us in our Christian life, just as someone like David Beckham, taking football practice at a youth club in a deprived area, can really inspire the players and encourage their coaches. On the other hand, far more people watch top quality sport than play. It is almost as if team GB win on our behalf. Christianity is not, however, a spectator sport. We are either participants or we are uninvolved. We cannot rely on other people to be good for us!

Fifthly and finally, top athletes get where they are largely by their own efforts and that is why we admire them for it. You and I are what we are by the grace of God and that is why we give Him the glory for any successes we might have. So we venerate the saints, but don't worship them, and we look to their example and fellowship to support us in our quest to cooperate with the grace of God for our own salvation and that of the whole of creation.